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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

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A Complete Book-Length Novel

PRENTISS OF THE BOX 8

By LYNN WESTLAND

FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION

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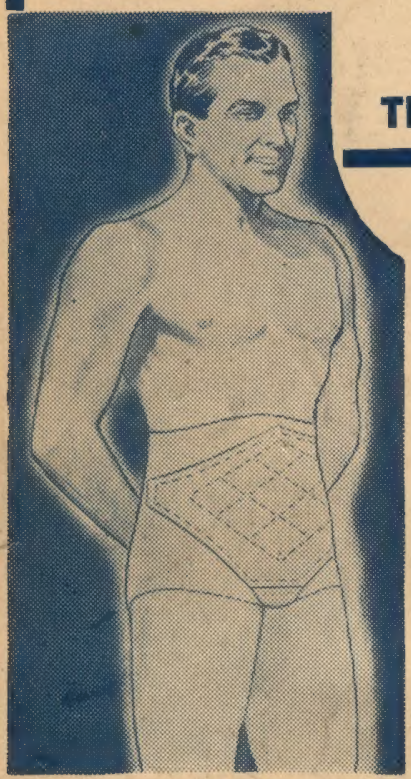

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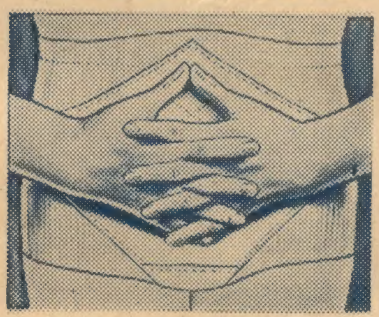

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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

Volume 7 ★★★ JUNE, 1944 ★★★ Number 3

SUSPENSEFUL BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

PRENTISS OF THE BOX 8.....**By Lynn Westland** 10

When Pete Prentiss went to claim his legacy, the Box 8 Ranch, he didn't pay much attention to the conditions he had to sign. They seemed all right on the surface: the foreman, Cold Deck Jones, was to stay on for five years, and the policy of the Box 8 was to continue unchanged. What Prentiss didn't know, however, was that this policy was one of murderous freezing out of the smaller ranchers in the valley, and that he was inheriting the justly aroused hatred of the entire valley!

Short Story

MESQUITE.....**By Bliss Lomax** 78

Dick Womack was breaking up Ed Russell's home when Fate offered an unparalleled opportunity for Ed to get rid of the outsider. But Ed Russell had his own plans for Womack . . .

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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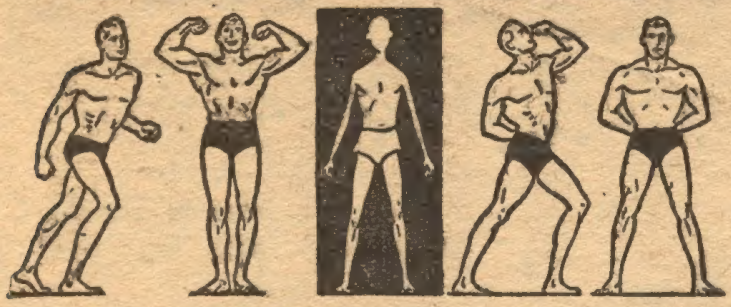

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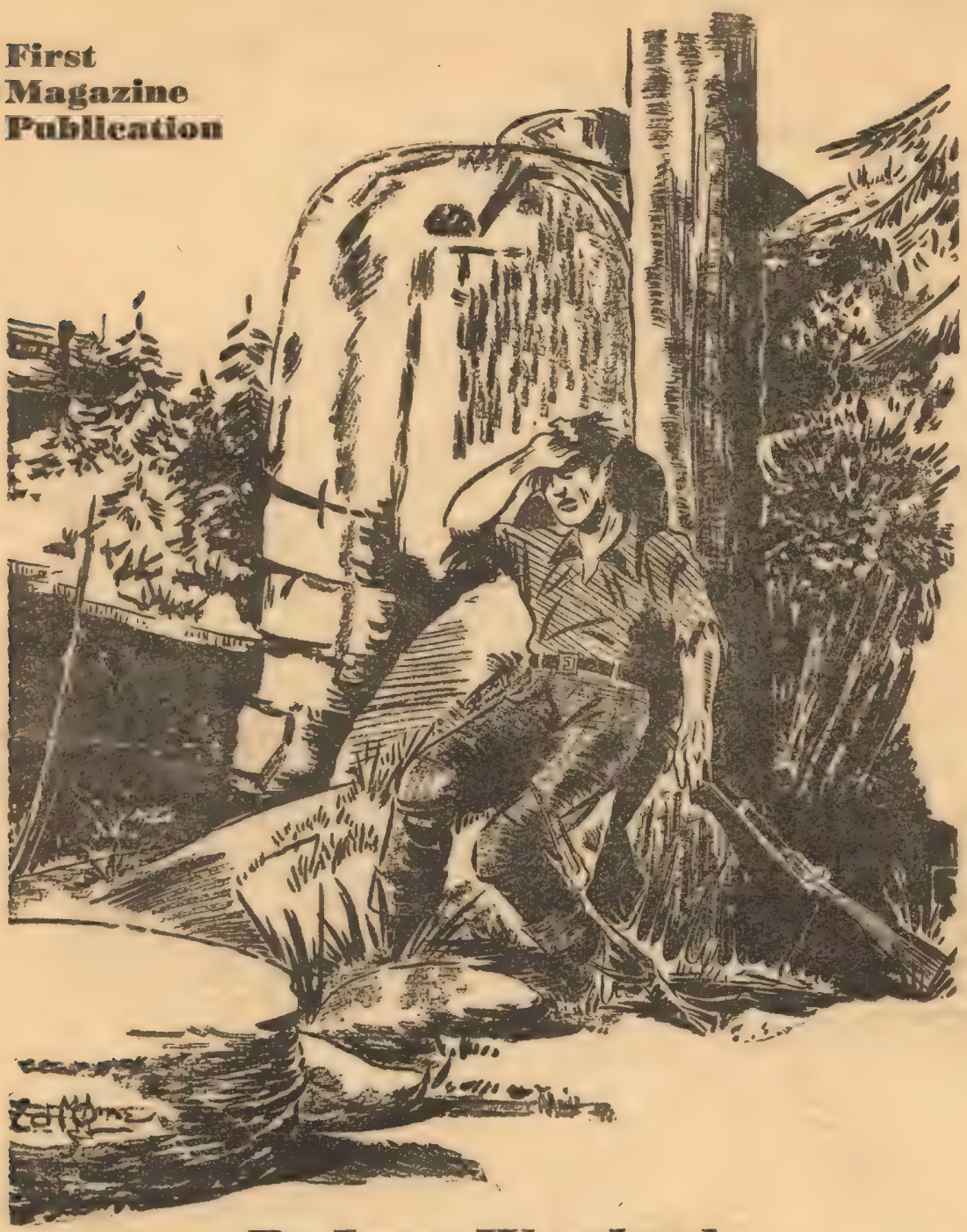
Pete brought the club down across the puma's neck.

An Exciting Book-Length Novel

There were only two conditions to Pete Prentiss' inheritance of the Box 8; he had to carry Cold Deck Jones as foreman for five years, and the ranch must be run as it had been run in the past. But, after he signed them and became the new owner, Pete found out he'd signed a pledge to continue a policy of cold-blooded freezeout upon the small landowners nearby, and had inherited the just hatred of the entire community!

First Magazine Publication



By Lynn Westland

(Author of "Saddle River Spread")

CHAPTER I

Poison Man

THE freight train swung around a curve and slowed for the water tank and the town behind, sighing softly from a hard run as it gulped a drink. Pete Prentiss stood up from a pile of straw in one corner of a freight car, brushed himself off, and viewed Barlock with an appraising gray eye.

"Looks like we're here," he rumi-

nated, and grinned, so that the copious splashing freckles under his carroty hair seemed to riot. "Some class, too, me ridin' in a private car this way, and all. But then, it befits the owner of the biggest ranch in this part of the country to arrive in state."

He jumped, as the train gave one last jerk before stopping. That lurch sent Pete rolling in a heap in the dusty road which ran beside the track. He picked himself up, knocking the dust from faded blue levis, to observe that he was the grinning target for three separate pairs of eyes.

"That's one hombre we don't need to watch, anyway, Mart," one of the trio observed, hunkering down a little more comfortably on the stake-and-rider fence which decorated the opposite side of the road. "Yuh should complain to the management about the way they run the railroad," he added to Pete.

"Reckon you're right," Pete agreed good-naturedly. "Next time I eat dinner with the president, I'll tell him to fire that engineer." He surveyed the three with a quickening interest. They looked like ordinary cowpunchers, but it was extraordinary for such a trio to loiter thus outside of town. Every one of them, he saw, was overloaded with hardware, and there was something in the tense way they watched the road which belied the momentary mockery at his expense.

"But why wouldn't I bear watchin'?" he inquired. "Here I arrive by special train, private car and everything. 'Course, that's proof enough of my social standin'—"

"Looks to me like yuh was settin'," the one who had spoken before guffawed. "Anyway, yuh wouldn't do. We're watchin' for a skunk with a beak like a hawk, who'd be two-three inches shorter'n what you are, and he'd likely have yellow hair, to fit his nature."

"Yeah?" Pete shrugged. "Glad I don't fit. You gents don't look like you was a welcomin' committee, exactly."

"We'll welcome this Prentiss hombre with hot lead if he shows his ugly mug around this country," was the grim rejoinder. "But just keep yore trap shut, bo. Yuh ain't heard nothin', understand?"

"Sure, I ain't heard a durned thing," Pete agreed cheerfully. He eyed the three lazily, but far more appraisingly than they knew. The speaker was tall and dark like an Indian, but he had a chin like the protruding butt of a Colt .45. He was lanky and wiry as a cayuse in spring. One of his companions, who chewed and spat and allowed his eyes to rove up and down the road, was chunky, and he fondled a shotgun across his hunkered-up knees. The third man had a rifle, and he looked sleepy, but the roving edge of his glance was sharp as a file.

TURNING, Pete sauntered on down the road and into town. His face betrayed none of the sharp curiosity which filled his mind now. Of course, he might be mistaken, but it would be stretching the long arm of coincidence pretty far if those gunmen were watching for a man named Prentiss, a man whom they had patently never seen before, and that man were someone other than himself.

And that description which the tall man had given—of a man with a beak like a hawk and yellow hair, height about five feet ten—would have fitted the picture he'd once seen of Uncle George, which had been made on a tintype some score of years before. Or it would have fitted, equally well, the father he scarcely remembered.

But why should a trio of gunmen be perched out there like buzzards, watching the road which swung into Barlock from the south, frankly admitting that they intended to fill him full of lead if they sighted him? His looks, coupled with the mode of his arrival, had fooled them completely, but there was something disquieting in the whole idea.

His mind went back over the events of the past weeks. Something less than a month before, he'd been fired from a ranch several hun-

dred miles from here. Not because he wasn't a top hand, but simply because, with drought gripping that whole section of country for going on three years now, most ranchers were teetering on the thin edge of ruin, and payrolls had to be cut to the bone. Plenty of good men were afoot, looking for jobs where such were about as common as the dodo bird.

As an afterthought, at the time of his dismissal, his former boss had dug up a dog-eared letter, which had been forgotten in his coat pocket since his last trip to town, nearly a week before. That letter, judging from the postmarks on it, had been seeing a lot of range country, trying to catch up with Pete.

It had been from a firm of lawyers, hundreds of miles away, and roughly a hundred miles from Barlock here, informing him of the demise of his uncle, G. G. Prentiss, and that, upon furnishing proper proof of identity, he would inherit the Box 8 Ranch, lying some forty miles north and west of Barlock, in the foothills of the Silvers. If he'd call, at his earliest convenience—

Pete had called, a couple of weeks later. It had taken him that long to get there. But once he had arrived, the rather incredible news had turned out to be true. There had been no trouble about proving his identity. Uncle George was really dead, startling enough news in itself, for he had heard that buzzards lived forever. And, what was far more astonishing, G. G. had finally remembered that he had a nephew, and had willed him his entire estate, consisting of the finest and biggest and, from all reports, most prosperous ranch in Montana. The news had been a little staggering.

There had been a few clauses in the will which he had agreed to readily enough. Mr. Jonathan Blake had explained that, if he accepted the bequest, he would be legally bound not to sell, rent, or give away all or any part of the Box 8 during the ensuing five years. He could sell the increase of the cattle, of course, but not the ranch. Likewise, there were a few stipulations concerning the crew, who were to be employed as before, at least during those five years. After that time was up, the Box 8 would be his to sell or keep, as he desired, without any restrictions whatsoever.

SITTING in Jonathan Blake's elaborate but musty office, Pete had seen nothing unusual about such conditions. George Prentiss had built up the Box 8 over long years, starting with next to nothing and getting a fine property in the course of time. Naturally, he wanted his heir to appreciate it and keep the property intact for a while. Since, as Mr. Blake assured him, there was more than ample income from the ranch, as well as considerable cash in several banks, to meet all expenses and a good deal besides, there could be no good reason for any such sale as was prohibited.

Or so it had seemed then. Pete had readily agreed to what had seemed trifling provises, and had accepted the inheritance. Then he had set out for the Box 8 itself.

It would have been easy enough, of course, as heir of the Box 8, to explain his lack of funds to Mr. Blake and have some money advanced, so that he could ride into Barlock in state, either by horseback, on the stage, or on the train. But pride had kept Pete's mouth shut. He'd been used to looking after himself for quite some time, during the years in which Uncle George hadn't bothered his head about whether he lived or starved, and he could get to Barlock all right. Which he had just done, arriving by private car.

"And as airy and well ventilated a car as you'd find anywhere," he grinned to himself. "Likewise possessin' certain advantages, as it's turned out. But why the blazes should those hombres be waitin' out there to salivate me? I ain't ever done anything to them."

That was a question to which he could find no ready answer, but he didn't worry over it long. It wasn't his custom to do much worrying

over anything. Big, easy-going, thoroughly capable of meeting almost any situation, he had long since demonstrated that he could get along, and whatever sort of a misunderstanding there was would probably be ironed out without much trouble. Anyway, if he could make out as a saddle-bum, he ought to be able to handle things with such a property as the Box 8 back of him.

Barlock was just another cow town, with the advantage of the railroad running through it. But it held no special interest for him at the moment, other than a restaurant or so. He was hungry, and he had one lone silver dollar in his pocket. That would come in handy now to take care of the vacancy in the department of the interior.

He turned in at the first restaurant, noted that the stools along the counter were all occupied, and moved to a small vacant table. It was the only empty table in the place, he saw approvingly; that sort of popularity must betoken good food.

His order of steak and frieds had just been served when two newcomers entered the room and, after looking around, came toward his table. Pete surveyed them with frank interest, tabbing them promptly as father and daughter. The man was a typical cattleman—middle-aged, saddle-filling but not fat, with a brown mustache with adventurous tendencies below slightly graying hair. A good representative of his class.

It was the girl who drew Pete's eyes the way a good steer or horse did—all three were worth looking at. She'd come, he saw, about to his shoulder, she couldn't be more than twenty, and somehow it was just like a breath of the cool green hills blowing into that rather stuffy room when she came in. She was that sort of a person.

Her hair was brown, too, kind of a light, soft brown as though sunlight had gotten tangled in it and still stayed there even when the sun had gone down. Not a very big nose, but with sort of a saucy little up-tilt to it, and eyes as blue and clear as a mountain lake. She walked with a little unconscious swing, and though she wasn't big, she had sort of a competent air about her.

THAT was one break, anyway: the fact that every other place was filled, and they were coming to his table. Pete hospitably removed his dusty Stetson from one of the extra chairs.

"I hope we won't be intrudin' none," the cattleman suggested.

"Not any," Pete denied, and flashed that easy grin of his. "Me, I like company. Makes the food taste better."

By the time the meal was half finished, they were chatting like old friends. Pete was silently speculating. Chances were that they were neighbors of his, somewhere in this valley. He hoped so, for he couldn't think, off-hand, of any people who'd make better or more desirable neighbors.

There had been sort of a cloudy look in the back of their eyes when they had seated themselves, as though trouble were hanging in the background, a trouble which wasn't easy to shake off. He could see the faint lines of it in their faces, even in the fresh young face of the girl, and it worried him. It appeared to be trouble of the sort that still stayed with you when you went to bed, which colored all your dreams and made you wake up tired. That was bad.

Pete exerted himself to be entertaining, and he was glad to see that, for the moment at least, they had sort of forgotten about other things, and were able to laugh at his jokes as if they really enjoyed them. There was a real sparkle in the girl' eyes.

He felt a deep, pleasant satisfaction about that. Which was sort of funny, for in all his years of knocking around the range, he'd scarcely ever glanced a second time at a girl, and he had seen some right pretty ones at times, too. Only he hadn't been interested. Now it was different—

Now he was a cattleman himself—one of the richest men in the state,

from what Jonathan Blake had told him. Now, if he wanted to, he could look at any girl, ask her to marry him—

Pete felt himself blushing at the thought. Gosh, was he going off the deep end and falling in love with a girl that he hadn't even seen up to half an hour ago, and whose name he didn't even know? But why not? Stealing another glance at her, he knew with sudden, settled conviction that he couldn't imagine a nicer girl to fall in love with.

They were on the pie now—thick, melting slabs of real apple pie, topping off a mighty eatable meal. Suddenly the cattleman looked startled.

"Say," he said. "We haven't even introduced ourselves." His blue eyes swept Pete appraisingly. "You're a cowpuncher, of course?"

"That's been my brag," Pete admitted.

"Wouldn't be looking for a job, would you?"

"Why, that's right kind of you. And up to a few days ago, I sure would have. Don't know's I would right now, though."

"Well, I started out to tell our names. I'm Tim Dexter, owner of the K over T ranch. This is my daughter, Hazel."

"I'm sure right pleased to know both of you," Pete assured them, and held out his hand. "I'm Pete Prentiss, the new owner of the Box 8 Ranch—"

Something was wrong. He could see it instantly, in the eyes of both of them, the shocked incredulity, the swift-growing hostility, the way in which Tim Dexter jerked his hand back, just as it had been about to grip Pete's. A moment later, Dexter scraped his chair back, and Hazel was only an instant behind him.

"Prentiss, eh?" Dexter repeated, and his voice had become cold and level. "If I'd known that before—"

He didn't bother to explain what he meant, but his attitude was eloquent. Turning his back squarely, he walked across to the cashier, Hazel with him. Neither of them turned nor looked back as they walked outside.

CHAPTER II

Pandora's Box

FOR a long moment, Pete Prentiss stared after them, more hurt and surprised than he cared to confess. Here it was again, only in more tangible form. Those three gunmen, perched on the fence out at the edge of town, waiting to fill Prentiss of the Box 8 full of lead—that hadn't been just an isolated instance. It fitted in with the pattern which had been just now revealed again.

Much of it he was at a loss to understand, though a faint glimmering came to him, as he remembered that tintype of George Prentiss which he had seen years before. The tall cowboy had described George Prentiss aptly, with his hawk nose and face like a skunk. The tintype had always made Pete feel the same way, though he'd never formulated his thoughts so tangibly or bluntly. And what little he'd known of his Uncle George, during the years, had rather tended to confirm that belief.

It had been shaken of late by the realization that, however tardily, Uncle George had tried to make amends, and had apparently done so in a handsome manner. But if Uncle George was what he looked like, it was not only possible but probable that he had been disliked by his neighbors. Even that, however, was hardly an excuse for including his nephew in that same blanketing wave of hostility.

"Me, I might be a horse of a different color," Pete growled under his breath. "And most folks give a man a chance to show what he's like, in his own right." He stared blankly ahead for a moment. The thing, whatever it was, went deep. For Tim and Hazel Dexter had seemed to take a real liking to him, and on the basis of that, they should have given him a fair judgment.

But their hostility had been only too apparent. Which was too bad, just when he'd found himself liking them so well—

Pete arose, tossed the dollar on the

desk, and strode out into the evening. The sun was out of sight now, but the golden wave of its departure hung like a mellow benediction over the town, softening its normally harsh outlines into something approaching beauty. Nature was serene, but its mood, which he had enjoyed to the full a little while before, was lost on Pete now.

He glanced around speculatively. Half a block down the street a lumber wagon, with two rather skittish horses, was pulled up in front of a general merchandise store. Tim Dexter was just disappearing inside the door. On the seat, controlling the horses with almost absent-minded attention and perfect ease, was Hazel.

Pete didn't hesitate. It had never been his way to do so when he had made up his mind about anything, and if there was some misunderstanding here, the quickest, most direct way of getting rid of it was to start right in. And he particularly wanted to shoo away any flies of misunderstanding with this girl.

She looked up as he approached the wagon, and her face went still and cold, but she gave no other sign of recognition as he rested one foot on the hub of the wheel and looked up at her, hat in hand.

"Miss Dexter," Pete said soberly, "I'd sure like to apologize, if I've done or said anything to offend you folks. I didn't aim to, and I'd like to know what the trouble is—"

For an instant her gaze met his, and at the fiery heat in it, he stepped back, abashed.

"Sir, I never want to speak to a Prentiss!" she flashed.

At that moment Tim Dexter came out, arms laden with bundles. He looked hard at Pete, but said nothing, merely climbed onto the seat beside his daughter, took the reins, and they were off down the street in a little cloud of dust.

PETE looked after them, his face suddenly a little grim, turned and sauntered up the street. That answer hadn't explained much, but she had made it just as plain as had the trio on the stake-and-rider that to be a Prentiss in that country was the same as poison.

"Reckon, if it was a choice between ownin' the Box 8, and havin' her like me, I'd rather get along on my own, same as usual," Pete muttered grimly. "But the mischief's done now. There's some misunderstandin' in this country that's going to be cleared up. And I don't mean maybe."

His eyes found what he sought—a faded sign of a law firm on a warped door. H. L. Henders, Att'y at Law. He pushed open the door, climbed a rickety stairs, and saw, from the open door at its head, that H. L. Henders was still in his office. A second glance around told him why his uncle had entrusted most of his affairs to Blake and Blake. Henders could handle local chores, but that was all.

Henders himself, a little, shifty-eyed man who reminded Pete of a weasel questing in gopher holes, arose uncertainly as he entered the door, nodding.

"Anything I can do for you?" he inquired squeakily.

"Maybe." Bulking large in the doorway, Pete surveyed him. "I'm Pete Prentiss."

The change in Henders was as swift as it had been when he had revealed his identity before, but of an opposite quality. Cordiality fairly oozed from him as he sprang forward to shake hands and set out a chair.

"Well, well, Mr. Prentiss, come right in. I'm delighted to see you, sir—delighted."

"You're the first one in this neck of the woods," Pete said, accepting the chair. "I seem to be about as popular as poison ivy, otherwise. What the blazes is wrong with me?"

"Looking at you, Mr. Prentiss, I'd say there wasn't a thing wrong with you. But—er—your uncle, the late Mr. G. G. Prentiss—he was, I may as well confess, rather disliked by his neighbors. Probably you've inherited some of the distrust which they felt for him."

"It looks like it. You'll want proof of my identity, I suppose." Pete pulled out an envelope and tossed it over. "There it is, from Blake and Blake. And now—well, I'd like to get

a little cash, if it's not too much trouble. Enough to get a horse and get out to the Box 8."

"Certainly, certainly, Mr. Prentis." Henders glanced hastily over the credentials and handed them back. "The local bank, of course, is closed for the night, but I can let you have a couple of hundred dollars of my personal funds. Tomorrow I will make all arrangements, and you can draw on the bank, or on your other banks, for any sum within reason, of course."

"What's within reason?" Pete asked curiously. "I don't figure to need much now, but I'm just wondering what there may be. Blake didn't tell me much."

Henders folded his hands carefully, much as though they had been a legal document.

"You have on deposit in the local bank the approximate sum of forty thousand dollars," he told him. "Investments, cash and other securities which could be made fluid, not counting the Box 8, its stock and other resources, approximate another two hundred thousand dollars. The cattle which you will sell each fall from the Box 8 will pay, above all running expenses, some twenty-five thousand dollars clear. The ranch itself, which you are, of course, precluded from disposing of for at least five years, is worth at least as much as all the other properties put together."

PETE whistled. He was staggered. He had imagined, vaguely, that his whole inheritance might come to perhaps a quarter of that sum. But this—why, this was a fortune.

"The Box 8, and everything else, I may add, is free and unencumbered," Henders added. "Your uncle was a very careful business man."

He drew out a long red wallet, extracted several bills and tendered them.

"Here is the two hundred dollars, Mr. Prentiss. It's all I happen to have on me at the moment—"

"That'll be plenty, and thanks," Pete assured him. More puzzled than ever, he took the money, turned, then hesitated at the door.

"You know Tim Dexter of the K over T, I suppose?"

"Certainly. A neighbor of yours, I believe, on the south and east. Has a small spread."

"Thanks." Pete had learned what he wanted to know. A neighbor, with a small spread. And the Dexters certainly were not impressed with the wealth of their neighbor, that was plain.

Dusk was falling now, and he was just as well pleased. People in this town had a funny way of looking at strangers, and those who knew him looked even funnier. He went to a livery stable, bought a horse and saddle, without telling who he was, and swung into the saddle with a sigh of relief. It was nice to have a horse between his legs again. Forty miles to the Box 8. He'd make it nicely in time for breakfast, with a couple of hours in which to snatch a nap somewhere along the road.

He made the schedule without any trouble, finding the Box 8 easily enough. During the ride out from town, he had seen enough to confirm his hunch that the Box 8 was the biggest ranch in the entire section of country. And the big outfits were apt to be disliked by the smaller landowners, though he knew there must be more than that to this feeling of hostility which permeated the country.

There were big, fine buildings on the Box 8, and the whole had an air of prosperity, oddly at variance with so many spreads. The ranch seemed to spread out, to fill and straddle a big valley, to run well back into the hills and mountains in either direction.

It was just before the early sunrise when he rode up and dismounted, and already there was stir of activity, as a clatter from the cook house announced breakfast. Looking about, Pete nodded approvingly. The foreman here, whoever he was, was keeping things running efficiently, pending the arrival of the new owner. Small wonder that Uncle George had included a proviso in his will that these men should be kept on.

Three or four men, hurrying for

the cook house, glanced at him without particular interest. Another man came out and, at sight of him, paused, and instinctively Pete knew that he was looking at his foreman. The man was tall, square-built, not heavy, but with a kind of tigerish grace about him. His face was set, expressionless, the eyes gray and cold. In fact, the coldness about him impressed Pete more than anything else.

"You lookin' for something, cowboy?" he asked.

"Reckon so," Pete agreed, dismounting. "I'm Pete Prentiss."

There was no outward change in that granite face, but for just an instant Pete saw what looked like shock and incredulity in those obsidian eyes.

"I wouldn't have knowed you, Prentiss."

"Here's the papers, if you want to look them over."

"If you've got the papers, I don't need to look 'em over." The foreman extended his hand. "I'm Jones —Cold Deck Jones, they call me. Foreman. Glad to see yuh, Prentiss."

PETE accepted the hand, feeling as if there were something radically wrong somewhere. Cold Deck! The name, with all that it implied, seemed to fit, and he saw that Cold Deck seemed to take a grim pride in the monicker. Already Pete had an uneasy understanding as to why the Box 8 and all that it stood for should be hated in this valley.

"Better come in and eat," Cold Deck went on. "You been ridin' most of the night, eh?"

"Yeah. I arrived in town last night, got a horse, and came on out."

"I wouldn't stay in that town, either." Cold Deck glanced down the long table and performed a brief introduction.

"Boys, this is Prentiss—your new boss."

They stared back at him, eating suspended for a moment, while there was mutual appraisal. There was no sign of welcome, or otherwise, but they were looking him over. Pete Prentiss looked like a man who knew the cattle business, but he didn't look like what they had been led to expect.

For his part, Pete could see at a glance that these men knew their business, too——they were a picked, efficient crew. And they were of the same stamp as Cold Deck Jones, down to the last man.

They went on eating as he slid into a chair beside Cold Deck, and there was little talking while they ate. The food was good, and there was plenty of it. As a business, it was apparent that the Box 8 was well run from every standpoint. But more and more he could see that it wasn't what he had expected.

"What's this valley called?" he asked suddenly.

Cold Deck's eyes were frosty, whether with a gleam of cold humor or not, Pete wasn't quite sure.

"These hills are the Silvers," he said. "And Silver River runs down through this valley. But you want to know what the folks call this country?"

"Somethin' like that, I reckon."

"They call it Poison Valley. And the Box 8 is Pandora's Box to them —after bein' opened."

CHAPTER III

Renegade On a Limb

PETE digested this in silence for a minute. Pandora's Box, opened—with troubles and torments spilled out over the valley. The Box 8 was that to the rest of the valley, was it, an emanation of poison? At the moment, he did not consider how odd it was that Cold Deck should so casually refer to Pandora's Box. But it was evident that the foreman was a man of parts.

"You'll be wantin' to look things over, I suppose," Cold Deck suggested. "There's a big letter that yore uncle left for you to read, and some other papers."

"I think I'll take a ride out around first thing this morning," Pete decided. "Sort of get an idea of this place in mind. This afternoon will be soon enough to go over things."

"Just as you say. You want a guide?"

"Guess I can make out well enough. I'm used to ridin' alone."

Cold Deck made no comment. Once again Pete was struck by the cold, impersonal efficiency which pervaded the place. The men moved like clockwork, without waiting for orders. Everyone rode well armed, he noted. Selecting a fresh horse from those in the corral, Pete threw on a saddle and set out by himself.

Pride in possession of such an undoubtedly fine ranch as this was struggled oddly with the disquieting things which he had heard since coming to Barlock the previous evening. Pete had casually announced that he was used to riding alone, which was literally the truth, but he had not meant to imply that he was in any sense a lone wolf. He liked his fellow-men, and had always got on well with them, wherever he happened to go. To be disliked, distrusted, or worse, was new in his experience.

"Reckon, considerin' what Uncle George was like, it's not much to be wondered at, the way folks regard this place," he nodded. "But that'll have to be changed."

Within a couple of hours he began to get the picture. He had seen big herds of sleek, fat cattle, grazing in knee-high grass, had seen ample water and good shelter, along with a few excellent belts of timberland, and he had talked, casually, to half a dozen cowboys whom he had encountered.

The Box 8, if he had doubted it before, was revealed now as a vast ranch, spreading out in every direction from the home buildings. The main part of it filled the valley of the Silver and overflowed beyond. This valley itself was long, wide and deep, and all along the northern border it rose sheerly in a succession of rocky cliffs, broken by patches of timber here and there. At most places nothing less agile than a mountain goat could get up or down. There were two breaks, some miles apart, both on the Box 8, and good roads wound up and down there.

Seeing it, Pete did not need to be told that these roads, being on Box 8 land, were private, nor that they were the only roads through the rimrock and on down the valley toward town and the railroad, for a long distance in either direction. Ranches lying back behind the Box 8 would need to use these roads, or else circle a long way around. Yet he saw no one using them, and commented on the fact to a cowboy.

The man, his face watchful under a week's growth of beard, laughed shortly.

"Nope, don't nobody use these roads these days," he nodded. "There's about eight or ten outfits, back in there, that used to till old G. G. put a stop to it."

"Why?"

"They wouldn't pay toll," the cowboy answered briefly.

"Any other good route around?"

"I wouldn't call 'em good, though they're passable, some seasons of the year, if you travel maybe fifty miles east, or seventy west, addin' a hundred or a hundred and fifty for the trip. They'll come to time."

Pete asked no more, but it was apparent to him now that the Box 8, lying athwart the natural trails, was a bottleneck which, plugged up, could choke the life from the rest of the country. Poison Valley! He rode in the opposite direction, marveling anew at the well watered condition of the country, in a year when drought gripped most of the land in feverish fingers. Even under the moon, the night before, he had been struck by the barren country, the lack of water. But there was no such lack here on the Box 8.

Silver River itself was not a large stream, but there was a good deal of water in it, even for this low-water season of a dry year. Ahead of him showed a spreading gleam of water, the glimpse of a lake, cut off by a hill. Leaving his horse, Pete climbed on foot, making his way now among straggling pines and fir. He rounded a bend and caugh. his breath.

Above the path the thinly timbered slope still rose steeply. Below it was almost bare of vegetation, sun-

baked and brown. But two hundred feet down the steep slope was water —the lake which he had seen before. It was not above two hundred yards across at the widest place, nor more than a quarter of a mile long, but in this pocket in the hills was penned a tremendous amount of water. It was deep—immeasurably deep, to judge by appearances.

At the far end was a dam, man-made, across the narrow gorge. Silver River had run through here, apparently, in a succession of water-walls, coming out through that gorge far below, forming a little grand canyon in this spot. But the dam had stopped its wild brawling run, impounding the river into a lake. And, where he could glimpse the river-bed on below the dam, it was practically dry.

The sudden blast of a gun jerked Pete around, startled. The sight which met his eyes, a hundred feet on ahead, along the narrow path, was even more startling.

A huge puma was launching itself down from the branch of a pine tree, straight at a boy of fifteen or so who stood almost directly below it. Evidently the boy had seen the puma up there and had fired, wounding it, but not very seriously. Now he was trying to jump back, to fire again as the enraged beast leaped, and even as it struck him and they went down together in a sprawling heap, Pete could tell that the gun had jammed.

Squalling in shrill rage, the big cat wasn't trying to escape, but to fight, to kill. Pete had no gun—he hadn't owned or packed a weapon for a long time. But there was a broken branch in the pathway which would make an excellent club, and a few steps brought him into action.

The boy was fighting back manfully, swinging his clubbed gun, but he was getting a mauling, and in danger of much worse. The cat's hurts were more painful than serious. Growling and spitting, it heard Pete coming and turned, crouching, to confront this new menace. Squatting back, a red gash across its scalp where the bullet had grazed, blood running down and into its mouth, it was doubly ferocious in appearance, and as he came, instead of retreating, it lunged in a fresh spring.

Gauging the jump, Pete sidestepped a little, swinging the heavy club with every ounce of his weight behind it. He brought it crashing down across the neck of the puma, missing his aim at the skull, felt the club crack in his hand with the force of the blow.

IT WAS enough to knock the big cat off its feet and send it spinning, but before he could strike again it was back on its feet and coming on. His next blow caught it glancingly; then it had knocked him off his own feet as it struck. A side-swiping claw raked along his left arm, gashing it painfully. His attempt to strike again was met by another savage clawing stroke, which knocked the club out of his hand and sent him sprawling back.

The rifle spat again and the puma, launching itself at him, seemed to hesitate. Its leap collapsed in mid-air, and it fell, kicking and still squalling in rage, at his feet.

"Gosh!" the boy, somewhat bloody himself, stared down at the cat, rifle ready. "I—I guess he's dead now, eh?"

"Guess he is." Pete stirred the puma with his toe and nodded. "That was a good shot—and just in time to save my bacon."

"Well, you had it comin'. You sure saved my skin; he'd have clawed me to pieces. I thought I was a goner when the gun jammed. Though I'd have been all right, only he jumped just as I shot, and I 'most missed."

"I've seen some pumas before," Pete confessed. "But he's the biggest I ever run across. And it's mighty seldom that they will fight that way."

"Well, this is old One-Eye, you see," the boy said, as if that explained everything.

"Guess he has lost one eye, now you mention it. Likewise some teeth."

"Yeah. One-Eye, he was so old and crippled that he was starvin', and that made him savage. I looked up

and saw him lookin' down at me, and I shot quick—but not quite good enough."

He was surveying Pete with frank intentness, wiping away some of the blood from his scratches with an impatient swipe of his shirtsleeve, which was ripped and torn. He had a rather engagingly freckled face and an approving grin.

"You're some scrapper, feller, your own self," he added. "If that club hadn't cracked, you'd have finished him off with it."

"It was lucky that you had the rifle, at that." Pete returned the grin.

"Yeah, I guess it was. I was waitin' here for a hombre, figgerin' he might show up."

Before the cold matter-of-factness of that statement, Pete stared a little. He hadn't misunderstood. As the boy went on to amplify, his face was suddenly old beyond his years, with a stern, almost savage set to the jaw.

"The new boss of the Box 8," he amplified. "I'd sure like to let daylight into that lobo's carcass!" He spurned the puma with his foot. "Compared to him, this killer is a plumb harmless pet."

"Wasn't you runnin' some risk, comin' here on the Box 8 to gun for its owner?" Pete asked mildly. "You wouldn't be none too popular around here with them sentiments, I'd think."

"Naw, I ain't popular around here, mister—but when a varmint needs killin', I figure the only thing to do is go ahead and kill it! I—I wouldn't much mind if they did get me—after I'd got him. That'd free the valley, then, and—and Dad and Sis."

"Like you've mebby noticed, I'm new to this country," Pete said. "But it still seems to me like you've taken on a pretty big job for a boy of your size. What's the main reason you want to get rid of this hombre so bad?"

"The main reason? The boy's eyes blazed into his. "Mister, if you saw a rattlesnake about to strike a baby, you'd kill the rattler, wouldn't you?"

"I sure would. But you didn't seem to know what this fellow looks like, even. If he's new, how do you figger he's so bad?"

"You sure are new to this country, ain't you, mister? Well, I'll tell you. The reason he's so bad for the country is the stranglehold this ranch has got on the whole valley. Old Grasp 'n' Grab started it, and he done a good job of grabbin'—till he stopped a chunk of lead."

OLD GRASP 'N' GRAB! So that was what G. G. Prentiss had been called in the valley! And his last sickness had come from lead poisoning, eh? Murder, in other words—the same sort of treatment which it seemed so many people, including this boy, were anxious to mete out to him, as his uncle's successor.

"Grasp 'n' Grab got this land, and it straddles the country," the boy went on heatedly. "Can't nobody use the roads to town without payin' toll, nor drive their stock across the Box 8, like they've been doin' all these years, without payin' toll! Five dollars a head! Can't nobody stand that. And all the folks down below, like our own ranch—old Grasp 'n' Grab hogged all the water rights in this country, and then he shut off the water. Right now, our cattle are gettin' thin for want of feed, because they can't go off far to good pasture, and they'd of died when the river went dry if we didn't pump enough water every day to keep them going. And if you think that's an easy job, mister, for ninety critters and a dozen cayuses, just try it some time!"

"So that's the way it is, eh?" Pete asked. "The water is shut off from you?"

"Yeah. And plenty other ranchers, too. Some of them are worse off'n what we are. Old Grasp 'n' Grab aimed to freeze us all out of this whole country and have it at his own price—till he stopped lead. Now I reckon he's gettin' a taste of his own medicine, with somebody who knows as much about bein' a devil as he did!"

Pete was shocked and a little surprised at the intensity of this boy's hate, though as the picture unfolded

it became more and more understandable.

"Well, I can see your side of it," he acknowledged. "But you say this Grasp 'n' Grab is dead. Why be so set against his successor? How do you know he's so bad?"

"How? Because everybody knows what he is, that's why. In the first place, he's old Grasp 'n' Grab's nephew, and that's sayin' plenty—anybody with that blood in their veins is pure poison to start with. Anyway, when he come to die and knew he couldn't help it, old Grasp 'n' Grab fixed it up so's his policies would go right on. Willed it to this nephew with the understandin' that every last thing he'd started would be carried through to the last drop of blood anybody in the valley had left. We know that—and so I figgered the only way to—to save Dad and Sis and the K over T was to kill this skunk 'fore he could do any more damage."

"The K over T?" Pete repeated, startled. "Is your sister Hazel Dexter?"

"She sure is. Say, mister—just who the blazes are you, anyway? You're some skookum fighter, I'll say that for you, but you're new to this country, and you're here on Poison Ranch—"

"Me?" Pete regarded him steadily. "I'm the man you aimed to kill. Pete Prentiss is the name."

The intensity of the boy's emotions was profound. Incredulity, rage, disbelief, disappointment, flowed across his face in rapid succession.

"You!" he said. "Oh—oh *hell!*"

CHAPTER IV

Prentiss Blood

BOB DEXTER continued to stare at him. Then abruptly he seemed to come to a decision. His face hardened.

"So you're that skunk, are you?" he demanded. "I—I—gosh, I thought you was quite a man, but if you're a Prentiss—"

He turned, a little blindly, took half a dozen steps, and looked back again. There were traces of tears on his face, but his voice was bitter.

"You saved my skin for me, and so I—I can't kill you now, special as you ain't packin' a gun," he flung back. "But that just goes for this time, hombre. Next time—look out!"

Pete stood to watch him go, strangely moved. He did not call after him nor attempt to reason with him, but he was deeply thoughtful as he returned to his horse and rode back toward the ranch buildings. Poison Valley! He was beginning to get a grim understanding of the situation, but there was a lot which still puzzled him, such as Bob Dexter's statement that he was committed to carrying out Grasp 'n' Grab's policies, here in the valley—

He was free, white and twenty-one. And for several years now he had been accustomed to going his own way and making his own decisions. But he was filled with a vague foreboding, an increasing sense of uneasiness which he could not shake off.

Reaching the buildings, he unsaddled his pony, turned it into the corral and went into the big, cool, unfamiliar house. He set about washing his lacerated arm and trying to tie it up, somewhat awkwardly, he turned to find a slant-eyed Oriental beside him with a basin of hot water, cloths and unguents.

"Me fixum scratchee," he said impassively, and worked with dextrous fingers, face still impassive. He did an excellent job, then, in answer to a question, indicated the room which had been G. G. Prentiss's office. There was a big desk, standing locked, and a safe in one corner of the room. The Chinaman padded in again on slippered feet and tendered him a key ring.

"This one for desk," he said, indicating it, and was gone again.

The desk was orderly, and as he slid back the roll-top a letter was revealed, sealed, addressed to himself in a legible but rather faltering handwriting. Pete stared at it, oppressed by that same nameless dread, as though the hand of a dead man,

which in life had been a bane and a curse to the valley, were somehow reaching out to rest upon his own shoulder. Then he shook off the feeling and slit the enevlope. After all, if Uncle George had left him such a princely inheritance, there was, there must have been, much that was good about the man.

"My Dear Nephew," the letter ran, "I write this, knowing that I have not much longer to live, and I shall die, as I have lived, without apology. You are, I believe, about twenty-four or twenty-five years old, and during that quarter-century of your existence I have taken not the slightest interest in you or your affairs, whether you have starved or prospered, lived or died. That has been due to three things. I have been interested in my own business, and have had no time for others. Secondly, your father and I quarreled even before he got married, and as there had been no love lost between us, I saw no reason for being concerned with any son of his. And third, though I had met her but once, I disliked your mother, a woman whom I judged ill fitted to be the wife of a Prentiss."

Pete stared vacantly for a moment, remembering that mother whom he had known—a woman ill fitted to be the wife of a Prentiss. Old Grasp 'n' Grab's judgment had been accurate there. She had been a warm-hearted, fine, generous woman in every respect—traits at clashing variance with those of G. G. Prentiss, or of the man she had married.

"The thing which has befallen me, however, has caused me to put my affairs in order," the letter went on. "In such an extremity, I turn to you for two reasons. The first, because, under the law, you are my legal heir, and it would be foolish to disregard what would otherwise upset all my plans. And the second reason is that, because you are a Prentiss, I am confident that you will be worthy of your father's name and blood, and so carry on the plans which I have made."

PETE'S smile was grim as he read. Here, had G. G. but known it, was an irony which, while it would have twisted his soul, would also have delighted that warped nature of his.

"When you read this letter, you will already have signed a paper in the offices of Blake and Blake, binding you legally to execute my wishes in accepting this your inheritance. And it is, as you will probably have discovered by now, what is commonly called a goodly inheritance. Broad, fertile acres, well watered, big herds of cattle, cash in the banks, mortgages on adjoining ranches which you can foreclose a little later without much trouble. You will be what I had aimed to be, a king, with none to dispute your sway. An absolute monarch!"

Reading, Pete nodded slowly. The character of the man was steadily emerging—his love of money, his greed for power, and a ruthlessness which stopped at nothing in getting them. The same nature as his own father had had, without any doubt.

"The conditions to which you have already agreed, and which are legally binding upon you, are for your own good, for the improvement of the Box 8," the letter went on. "Those conditions are two: The first, that you may not sell, rent, lease, or give away, during the next five years, any of the land, any of the water, or any of the privileges of the Box 8. No outsider may cross the ranch without paying toll at the rate already fixed. No man may obtain water, to which the Box 8 holds all legal rights, at any price. The Box 8, under these conditions, is the key to the whole valley—and by faithfully following these rules, it will be a key which will unlock the whole valley and add it to the Box 8 during the next half-decade!"

Pete stopped, blinking. So that was what he had signed, back in the office of Blake and Blake! It had seemed a harmless enough thing then, the way Blake had explained it. Certain provisions regarding the running of the ranch and keeping some of the present crew on for the next five years. It had never even occurred

to him that there would be any serious catch in it.

"Being a Prentiss, I am sure that you will understand the necessity for these precautions in building an empire, and will wholeheartedly approve and carry them out with inflexible will," the letter went on. "Only by being strong, by being at times ruthless, can dominance be achieved, and that has been my goal from the first. I have nearly achieved it, and though I have been slain, I will still attain!

"I have been shot, because I am hated. You, as my heir, will inherit that same hatred. But while it entails a certain amount of risk, it is worth it, to become the richest, most powerful man in a thousand miles of country! Cold Deck is an able foreman; the crew of the Box 8 are all picked men. You can depend on them. And the second provision, also for your protection, is that Cold Deck can not be discharged nor demoted during the next five years, nor any man of the present crew, without his consent and approval. After the five years are up, you will be in such iron-clad control of the whole valley that no man can challenge you, and your hands will no longer be bound in any way whatsoever."

The writing was becoming illegible, as though the iron will which had kept Grasp 'n' Grab alive to plan and write and set things in order were faltering a little.

"I have written at length, to make things clear to you. As a Prentiss, I do not think that you will need any advice. Rest assured that you can depend on Cold Deck and the crew to the very limit, so long as you work to carry out my wishes. Cold Deck is all that his name implies, a man utterly ruthless. But he has one redeeming trait, in that he is absolutely loyal to my interests—so much so that he will cheerfully subjugate his own personal interests to yours, even if the doing should cost him his life. I repeat, you may absolutely rely on him, so long as you work to carry out my wishes."

Pete stared blindly ahead. His wishes! As brutal a set of desires as he had ever encountered in his life—wishes which would lead to ruin, utter and complete, for the Dexters, and for many another family whose only sin was that they happened to have acquired land somewhere beyond the borders of the Box 8, land which Grasp 'n' Grab had coveted!

AND the devil of it was that he had signed that agreement without even faintly realizing what it let him in for, and bound himself legally to do this monstrous thing!

He flung up his head. As Grasp 'n' Grab had pointed out, he was legal heir. There must be a way of getting around such a legal technicality. He dropped his eyes to the letter again.

"Again I repeat, you may trust Cold Deck to carry out my wishes. I have nearly implicit trust in your Prentiss blood, but your mother's blood might be the joker in the deck, and I have guarded against any slip. If you fail to live up to these terms and to enforce my rules to the final letter, then Cold Deck will still carry out my wishes—and as an enemy he is implacable, a man who never hesitates if killing has to be done!"

There was an icy feel in the pit of Pete's stomach now as he read on:

"In addition, if you fail, there is self-interest to motivate Cold Deck, who is a man after my own heart. For if you fail to keep the agreement, which became legally binding when you signed, then the Box 8, its herds, and all properties whatsoever go, not to you, but to Cold Deck Jones, who will carry out my wishes."

The letter was signed, "G. G. Prentiss."

Pete stared. The thing which had struck him as grim irony a few minutes before was still irony, and more grim than ever. For now it seemed like a weapon turned against himself.

Grasp 'n' Grab had counted on his Prentiss blood. But it was apparent that the real truth had never come to the ears of G. G. Prentiss. For, as a baby, Pete had been adopted as the legal son of Mr. and Mrs. Peter

Prentiss. But, actually, there was not one drop of Prentiss blood in his veins.

CHAPTER V

Cold Deck

STILL staring unseeingly, jaw clamped hard, Pete was suddenly glad of the truth, that he was a Prentiss only in name. He hardly remembered the man whom he had always called father, but such memories as he did have of him were of a man so exactly like Grasp 'n' Grab that it was like a nightmare—a man ruthless, grasping, cruel. In Cold Deck Jones there might be the one redeeming trait of loyalty. If there had been any redeeming trait in Peter Prentiss or his brother George, Pete had never heard of it.

He had been, even at that early age, more glad than overwise when Peter Prentiss had met a violent and untimely death. It had meant penury for his mother and himself, but, though she had had to work hard, he had sensed that she, too, preferred freedom at whatever cost. The next few years, before her own untimely passing, had been the happiest of his life.

There had been times, briefly, when he had felt a passing wave of bitterness at the callous indifference of the man he called Uncle George, a man reputedly rich, who never even bothered to look up his only brother's widow or son when they were destitute. Now his smile was mirthless. He had felt, in the last few days, that maybe he had done the man an injustice, had tried to think more kindly of him. But Grasp 'n' Grab did not deserve well of any man, even in thought.

Pete jumped up and strode to the window, back to the wall, then across to the window again—back and forth, like a caged tiger. The enormity of the situation had suddenly struck him. Grasp 'n' Grab had set a trap, not alone for the valley, but for him—and it looked as if both had been caught in it!

What could he do? His whole nature was revolted at the program. His impulse was to cast it overboard, to be a decent neighbor to the others in the valley, to live and let live, to be liked—and, possibly, even loved—in a particular case.

To let men cross the Box 8 as they chose, to allow them the use of the waters, of which there were ample and to spare, to give them a chance to live and pay their mortgages and prosper. As it was now, the Box 8 was a huge affair, more than ample as a self-sustaining unit, richer than anything he had ever coveted. The other program would be so much better, in every way.

But what could he do? If he let things slide for five years, as he was legally bound to do, he would be the most hated man in the country at the end of that time, with all chance long past of making any change or helping anyone in distress. Five years of such an existence and he would have been molded to the pattern of Grasp 'n' Grab—unless he, like G. G., should be murdered in the meantime.

To sell was impossible, as was alleviation of the conditions laid down so as to help his neighbors. If he did anything like that, Cold Deck would get the ranch, and that would help no one on earth—except Cold Deck. If he got out and abandoned his inheritance, exactly the same thing would result.

Pete stopped pacing, and stared out over the broad sweep of the valley. Poison Valley! Yet it could be made a paradise on earth, through the application of the golden rule, of a little brotherly love!

"I'll stick," he assured himself. "There's got to be some way of fighting this thing—and I'll fight it!"

He turned, at a step, to see Cold Deck entering the room. The foreman's eyes were as unsmiling as ever, and he made no comment on the gashed and bandaged arm of his employer, the memento of the encounter with the puma.

"You've read the letter?" he asked shortly.

"I've read it," Pete agreed.

"I imagine that it explains every-

thing," Cold Deck said. "But anything that you want to know, any time, I'll explain as best I can. There's just one thing I want to make clear. I liked your uncle. He and I understood each other. And while he was a hard man, he had his good side. He never skimped about payin' good wages, providin' good quarters or good food, or anything like that. And he saved my neck for me once, when I didn't deserve it."

THERE was a wintry humor in Cold Deck's eyes for just a moment.

"I don't reckon there was anything altruistic about him doing it. He wanted a man he could depend on to do his work, one who would do it without scruples, and I happened to be the man. I still am. So his wishes go—for the next five years. I don't give a damn whether I own the ranch or whether you do. You keep to the conditions, and I'll see they're carried out, and when the five years are up, if you want to fire me, I'll go, and that'll be that. But if you try to beat the game—I'll see that you don't. I just wanted to get that straight."

"I reckon we understand each other, Cold Deck," Pete said.

"I reckon you understand me." Cold Deck shrugged. "I'm not sure whether I understand you or not—and I don't much care. I've got one piece of advice, though. Play the game the way he laid it down. The deck's stacked so you can't beat it, but it's for you just the same. You'll want me and the boys workin' with you, backin' your play—for the only way you can go on livin' is by bein' ruthless. Better pack a gun—and it'll be handy if you know how to use it. And it'll be safer not to ride without a couple good bodyguards. I can give you some good men. Maybe you don't know it, but this whole country knows you've signed up to carry out G. G.'s conditions, and they're out gunnin' for you."

"I've had a few hints of that already," Pete confessed. "But as to a bodyguard—I don't think so."

"Suit yourself. But you'd better go heeled."

"We got any law in this country?"

"Such as there is, we've got. But it didn't save your uncle, and it won't save you—not if somebody gets a bullet in first. Here on the Box 8, there's not much danger—we'll see to that. But it'd be a good idea to start a clean-up one of these days, and not too far removed. We could root out most of the danger on our borders, and threw such a fear of death into any others that they'd get clean out of the country."

Pete considered his foreman with growing wonder. That Cold Deck meant exactly what he said, exactly as he said it, he didn't have much doubt. Yet at times the man revealed a hint of culture and education which his rough garb and manner seemed to belie.

"Money doesn't mean anything to you, then?" Pete asked suddenly.

Cold Deck stared a moment, shrugged.

"Not a damned thing," he confessed. "Power—yes. And as your foreman, runnin' this spread, I've got as much good out of it as I would in ownin' it. If that answers your question."

IT DID, in part, though it left much unanswered. For the next hour or so, Pete went into the affairs of the ranch with Cold Deck. Everything was in excellent order, and the outfit was highly prosperous, there was no question of that. If he wanted to accept the ranch on the conditions laid down, he would only have to leave the running of it to Cold Deck, and he might even leave the country during the coming half-decade, go far away where there would be no risk as the owner, and live like a king on the proceeds.

But to go away from the Silvers was the last thing which he wanted to do now. Hazel Dexter was in this valley, and he had a problem on his hands—and, he knew now, the biggest fight of his life. So far, he was utterly in the dark as to how he could even wage that fight, with his hands so tightly bound. But he'd bide his time and keep his own counsel for the present.

Above the door of the office, on sets of pronghorns, hung a repeating rifle. A case at the side of the room held a considerable assortment of pistols and revolvers, boxes of ammunition. Thoughtfully Pete selected a gun, filled a cartridge belt with shells and buckled it about his middle. It had been a long time since he'd carried a gun, but he knew how to use one.

Not that he aimed to use it, if he could avoid doing so. These men of the valley were his neighbors, and if he could act like a neighbor himself and make them see the light, it would be a lot better all around. In fact, if he wanted the friendship of the Dexters, and particularly of Hazel Dexter, that was the only course which he could follow.

But any way he took it, he knew that he was going to be in for trouble. If the crew of the Box 8 backed him, the valley would be hostile. If the valley liked him, his own crew would come gunning for him.

He was right back where he had started from in trying to figure this thing out. If he simply threw up the whole thing, Hazel might respect him, might even like him—but he would have left the Box 8 in the utterly grasping hands of Cold Deck, who would, beyond the shadow of a doubt, proceed to complete the ruin of the K over T. So that was out of the question.

"This here would make Solomon tear his hair," Pete reflected wryly, and saddled a hores again. He had to get off alone by himself to do some thinking. That was one good thing about the Box 8. It was big enough to be alone in.

The skies were cloudless, the sun brilliant and hot, with no hint of rain for a drought-stricken land. If it would only rain, that would solve the situation for many of the neighboring ranchers, who now needed feed and water so desperately—solve it temporarily. But there was little likelihood of such rain, at this season of the year, for another six weeks or two months, maybe three. And a solution would be forced by the march of events long before that. Whatever he was to do would have to be done soon.

Once more, from off in the distance, there was the crack of a rifle, coming without warning. But this time it was not one aimed at a catamount. Pete felt and heard the shock of the heavy-caliber bullet striking his horse, a mortal blow. The next instant, before there was time for any action on his part, the stricken cayuse had reared, pitched, and was tumbling headlong down a steep, sharp decline into a coulee below the trail, taking him with it.

CHAPTER VI

—Or Else!

THAT had been aimed for himself, Pete knew, a cranium cracker to end all further worries. It hadn't hit quite where it was aimed, but it seemed in a fair way to accomplish the intended job anyway. It was a long seventy feet to the bottom of the coulee, and the sides were almost sheer up and down, so that the cayuse would go clear to the bottom, rolling and kicking. If he went along the full distance, he'd probably be as dead as the horse by the time they stopped rolling.

Kicking his feet free of the stirrups was easy enough. Getting out of the saddle and away from the tumbling horse was hard, but by pushing against the saddle with both hands and one foot, he managed it. Even then, landing on his back on that slope, there was nothing to do but roll and tumble until he, too, brought up in a heap at the bottom, almost beside the now motionless horse.

A tangle of thorn-apple and rose briars grew there, and their cushioning effect on his tumble was hardly enhanced by the needles which made him feel as though he were perching on a cactus. Grunting, Pete struggled to his feet, got loose from the entangling vegetation, and, finding himself unhurt except for scratches and bruises, started climbing back up the slope again, gun in hand.

Talking of killing, as that trio had

done in town the night before, was one thing. Or a hot-headed but well-intentioned kid, such as Bob Dexter, waiting to shoot it out but essentially fair in the way he went about it. Things like that, while disagreeable, Pete could countenance. But bullets from ambush were something else again.

He poked his head cautiously over the rim of the coulee, hunkering back in the tall grass which fringed it, since it was entirely possible that the killer would be heading that way to see how successful he had been. But nothing stirred, except for a bumblebee on a wild flower, which waved a wing at Pete and went on with its quest for honey. Then, off about a quarter of a mile, Pete caught a glimpse of a horseman doing a vanishing act.

It was only a glimpse, and the horse and rider were too much hidden by trees and brush to enable him to take a second look. But the bullet had come from off there, so it was plain that the killer, for one of two reasons, was leaving the section as speedily as possible. Either he was satisfied that his shot had done a good job, or else he was afraid to risk investigation.

Since this was right in the middle of the Box 8, the latter seemed a reasonable guess. On the other hand, that very fact set up an unpleasant train of thought. Who would dare sneak in there from outside to try such a murderous attack? More to the point, who would know him, to take a shot at him?

He had met that troublesome trio beside the road, but they hadn't known who he was, and probably wouldn't ever find out, unless they saw him again, that the tramp was the new boss of the Box 8. A few people had seen him at the restaurant, but again, none of them, except Tim and Hazel Dexter, had known who he was, and he didn't for a moment believe that they had told anyone, or that they had fired that treacherous shot. Which left Bob Dexter, who likewise knew him—but after what had happened, he was convinced that Bob wouldn't sneak back to try a trick of this caliber.

The thing to which it added up was disquieting. The rider was well out of sight by now, and Pete walked over to where he had seen the horse. A little searching disclosed what he hoped to find. There, well hidden in a clump of brush, the horse had been left to stand, and not far off the rider had waited with grim patience to complete his murderous errand. But from every indication, he hadn't been there long.

SO FAR as he knew, he hadn't left any evidence behind him. There was no ejected rifle shell for possible betrayal. But Pete's jaw was a little grimmer as he surveyed the horse's trail.

"One shoe's a little loose," he deduced, studying it. "Which he hasn't discovered—yet."

It was dusk by the time Pete reached the ranch buildings again, and he entered the house without saying anything to anyone. Coming in that way, while the crew were busy with supper, he doubted if anyone noticed that he hadn't ridden back in. Which was just as well. By the next day, somebody would discover that his horse was missing, but if they didn't find it out tonight he'd be as well pleased.

Heads were lifted and men nodded in greeting as he entered the cook shack and slid into his place at the table. But as far as he could see, no one exhibited any sign of surprise or shock. He'd hoped, if the killer was here, to take him by surprise, catch him off guard. But that would be a hard thing to do with a crew of this sort. Most of these men were poker players, in games where life and death were the stakes. Their faces seldom showed any sort of emotion.

He could be as taciturn as they, so he ate in silence, then returned to the house. Pete was tired tonight, physically and mentally, but he set himself to wake up in the middle of the night, and did so automatically. Slipping on his clothes, he let him-

self out into the moonlit night and moved quietly over to the corral.

Careful to disturb the horses clustered there as little as possible, he moved slowly about the corral, while they retreated a little as he moved. Fifteen minutes of careful study, and he had what he was looking for. One of the horses in that corral had a loose shoe, and the imprint showed in the dust.

Someone on the Box 8 had tried to kill him. And the one man on the Box 8 who stood to profit by his death was Cold Deck Jones. Despite Grasp 'n' Grab's assurances concerning the man, and Cold Deck's own insistence that money meant nothing to him, the facts were grimly and unpleasantly suggestive.

"Methinks he doth protest too much," he reflected suddenly, remembering that letter of his uncle's again, the repeated assurances that Cold Deck was trustworthy. Had the theme been elaborated upon as a warning, with Grasp 'n' Grab knowing that his foreman would read the letter in any case? It was an idea, at least.

Pete smiled wryly as he crawled back into bed. Unless one or the other of them died, he had to keep Cold Deck on as foreman for the next five years. But there would have to be a showdown, one way or the other, long before that. A showdown had been aimed at that afternoon, but the aim had been just a little off.

"Only thing is, I can't expect such luck to hold, not much longer," Pete ruminated. "Even poor shots don't miss every time, and there's plenty hombres in this country who don't classify that way. If it wasn't for playin' into Cold Deck's hands, and some other folks lurkin' in the picture, I'd chuck the whole thing and go back to bein' a plain cowpuncher. Not half as disquietin' wonderin' where the next meal's comin' from as guessin' where the next bullet's comin' from."

Somewhat to his surprise, it was the foreman himself who brought up the subject the next day. Cold Deck entered the office and spoke without preamble.

"Soong Lin says you came in afoot last evenin', packin' yore saddle," he said. "How come?"

"Somebody took a shot at me—and hit my horse," Pete explained.

Cold Deck stared. If he was putting on an act, it was a good one.

"You didn't see who it was?"

"If I had, it wouldn't have stopped there."

"I'll tell the boys to tighten up today, in keepin' a watch. And like I said before, the sooner we go ahead and clean up this country the sooner it'll be safe. Whenever you give the word."

"I haven't been killed yet," Pete retorted. "And I want to get some things straight in my mind before I start anything. After that — we'll see."

"You're the boss," Cold Deck agreed. He turned to the door, looked out for a moment, and swung back.

"Looks like you was gettin' some visitors, from some of the neighborin' ranches," he said. "Five of 'em. I'll stick around."

"That won't be necessary," Pete said flatly. "They'll be here to confab, today."

"You're the boss," Cold Deck agreed again, and walked outside. Pete saw him meet the newcomers as they rode up, and jerk a thumb toward the house. One of the five he recognized: Tim Dexter. The other four had the look of cattlemen, and there was a grim, rather expectant look of trouble on all their faces.

The five tramped toward the house and in as he opened the door.

"Mornin', Prentiss," Dexter greeted him. "A few of us who are your neighbors have rode out to see you this morning. Meet Van Sice, MacCafferty, Tibbets, Underseth."

"Glad to know you," Pete acknowledged, but none of them offered to shake hands. They did, however, accept the chairs which he pushed forward for them. Dexter, by virtue of having met him before, seemed to be in the position of spokesman. He cleared his throat a little awkwardly.

"Maybe I made a mistake the other evenin', Prentiss," he said. "I don't know—yet. But we're willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. And we've come out to put things up to you, square. After that, it's up to you what happens."

"If yuh're a Prentiss, we know damn good an' well what'll happen," Van Sice growled. He was a heavy-set man, with a stubborn jaw, and his eyes were brooding under heavy brows. "But if you're a man, yuh can meet us halfway. We figgered it was only fair to give yuh a chance."

"I'll be glad to hear what you have to say," Pete agreed. "I'm new to this country, and there's plenty that I don't know about things."

"But yuh're a Prentiss, and yuh agreed to act like one, 'fore yuh ever came here in the first place," Van Sice growled again. "If yuh do that—then yuh can expect trouble, and plenty of it. We had to deal with one skunk—and we did it!"

CHAPTER VII

The Dutchman

TIBBETS shot a warning glance at the big, blunt-spoken Dutchman, but Van Sice merely shook his head stubbornly.

"Don't go warnin' me to use soft soap, for I ain't that kind," he growled. "There's nothin' like plain speakin', so folks can understand what yuh mean."

"The situation is this, Prentiss," Tim Dexter cut in, a little hurriedly. "Most of us were in this country before your uncle, G. G. Prentiss, came to this valley at all. MacCafferty, for instance, who lives way back near the headwaters of the Silver, had to fight Indians for half a dozen years to exist at all, and he saw his own brother killed and scalped before his eyes. Things like that make you feel that you've earned the land you live on. The rest of us don't have to fight Indians, but there were plenty of other things that had to be licked to get a foothold here, to make this a safe country for white men to live in. We did it, opened it up, tried to establish homes and to live like good neighbors. All that we're askin' now is for the chance to keep on doing just that."

"Sounds reasonable enough," Pete conceded.

"It ought to be. But, as Van here says, we need plain speaking. Your uncle didn't believe in the principle of being neighborly at all. A lot of good, decent men who were in here when he came are gone now. Some of them are dead—and some of those dead men were murdered. Others were frozen out, or tricked out, forced to leave the country, with a life's work lost, and them down and out through no fault of their own. And he tried to work the same game on the rest of us. He's dead now, G. G. is—somebody shot him, as you know. Who it was, I for one don't know, and, frankly, I don't approve of such methods."

"I do," Van Sice growled. "Wisht I'd done it myself. Only one way to deal with skunks."

Dexter spread his hands.

"You'd think Van was a bloodthirsty pirate himself, to hear him—which he isn't," he said. "But his opinion is pretty generally held, I'm warning you. Your uncle got control of all the water in the valley for his own interests, buying up water rights and so on, frequently fooling people into selling when they thought it was something else. He built a dam to hold the water, and has held it—so far. Not that he used it, or had any use for it, for the Box 8 is well watered anyway. So much so that the drought has hardly touched it—though it has played hob with the rest of us."

Pete recalled Bob's glum statement about pumping water for a hundred head of stock every day to keep them alive. But Dexter wasn't complaining for himself.

"Go on," Pete invited.

"We've come to the point where we've got to have water pretty soon now—and we're going to have it, one way or the other. Otherwise, our cattle will die of thirst. We fought your uncle in courts, but it seemed

that he had the water rights all tied up legally. We offered to buy water, but his price was prohibitive—that we turn over one out of every five head of cattle or horses that he furnished water for, the rest of the season.

"A lot of us, such as MacCafferty, need to go across the Box 8 with our cattle, or our wagons. He set a flat rate of five dollars a head, for horses or cattle, every time they crossed. To drive a team to town and back for a load of groceries would be twenty dollars. That's the situation as it has been. We're here to give you a chance to be decent. We're willing to buy or lease a right of way or the right to cross, and to use the water we need, and to pay a fair price. But we're not willing to be robbed."

"And either you meet us halfway, or there'll be more trouble than you and yore whole damned crew of gunnies can handle," MacCafferty amplified.

Dexter nodded.

"THAT'S plain speaking, Prentiss. And we're talking so plain to you, a newcomer, for just one reason. We know that the Box 8 has been left to you, lock, stock and barrel, on one condition—at least, that's the way we've heard it for the last week or so, from pretty straight sources. And that condition was that you would carry out your uncle's policies to the last degree."

"Anybody that'd agree to such conditions is a skunk," Van Sice added flatly. "We ain't sayin' that you are one, mind yuh—we're just sayin' what we heard. We're leavin' it up to you to show what yuh are. If you turn out to be a man, and treat us neighborly, you'll find us as good neighbors as can be asked for, and I'll apologize for anything I've said up to now. But we're puttin' it up to you to say."

They looked at him expectantly. There was an anxious expression in Tim Dexter's eyes which he could not miss. Dexter had liked him, the other night, before he learned who he was, as Pete had liked Dexter. And Dexter was hoping to be shown that he had been wrong. He wanted to be friends. Pete wondered if Hazel had said or done anything to make Tim feel this way now.

He had been in some bad situations before, some highly dangerous and unpleasant ones, two of them only yesterday. But at that moment he would cheerfully have taken the worst of any of them in preference to the spot he was in now.

One thing was already only too clear to him. Whoever had been at such pains to circulate the terms of Grasp 'n' Grab's will, and the fact that he had agreed to those conditions, had just as patently failed even to hint that Cold Deck Jones would get the Box 8 if he failed to live up to those terms.

These men had come to him in an honest, straight-forward manner, with a fair business proposition. He wanted to tell them that he appreciated it, that he'd like to accept it. But he had a strong hunch that the walls of this house had ears, and if he was to help these men at all, he had at least to go on living. And if Cold Deck knew that he had decided against the wishes of Grasp 'n' Grab, his chances for doing the latter would be slender indeed, and the chance to help these neighbors of his would completely vanish.

He stood up, took a turn about the room while they watched him, then swung to face them.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I appreciate your coming here this way and putting your cards on the table, without beating about the bush. I'm new to this country, and most of what I've found out since coming here is news to me."

He stopped for a minute, trying to find the words he wanted, but there were no such words. He couldn't explain, and nothing less than the truth would do him any good with these men. But the truth would be equally disastrous for them and for him.

"I can't give you an answer now, but I'll be glad to consider what you've said, and to let you know as soon as possible."

There was frank scorn in Van

Sice's heavy face, and doubt in all the others.

"We came here to get an answer, yes or no," Van Sice rumbled. "And we want it now. A man can give an answer to a thing like that without thinkin' it over."

Dexter had been watching Pete closely. Now he made a frank appeal.

"The other night, before I knew who you were, I liked you a lot, Prentiss," he said. "You struck me as being considerable of a man. And maybe I didn't have any right to act like I did, when I found out who you were. Thinkin' it over afterward, I figgered you must be quite a man, for a hypocrite don't act the way you did. We're here this mornin' because I figgered I had been wrong."

"It's right square of you to say that," Pete answered.

THEY waited a moment for him to go on. When he did not, Van Sice was about to speak again, angrily, but Dexter forestalled him.

"Maybe you're right," he said slowly, "if half what we heard about those conditions are true. Maybe you do need a little time to think it over. Or are you just stallin', knowin' the answer already?"

"Back where I came from, people haven't been in the habit of calling me a liar," Pete retorted.

Dexter colored a little, but Van Sice surged to his feet and toward the door.

"Yuh chargin' us toll because we came here to see yuh, and rode on yore blasted ranch?" he demanded.

Pete's face went white, but he held his voice steady with an effort.

"For a business call, you're welcome to ride this way as often as you like," he said stiffly.

"The only other business calls 'll be hot lead speakin', unless yuh do yore thinkin' damned quick, and do it good," Van Sice growled. "And there won't be no social calls. We're particular, here in this valley."

He stamped out, the others at his heels. Dexter hesitated, then turned back. It was apparent to Pete that he had no inkling of what his son had started out to do the day before, or of what had happened on the mountainside.

"I don't quite know whether to tell you this or not, Prentiss," Dexter confessed, "but I guess I'll give you the benefit of the doubt—hopin' it'll help you to decide right. Hazel said that if you gave us the answer we wanted, I was to give you her apologies for the other night. She was pretty sure, in thinkin' it over, that we'd been wrong. I've given you her message—and I hope we haven't been wrong."

Not waiting for any answer, he followed the others across to the waiting horses, swung into the saddle, and they were gone, stiff and erect, none of them looking back.

CHAPTER VIII

Zane Zackett

PETE watched them go, then, with abrupt decision, saddled a horse and set out for town. He had to have some advice. If there was any way out of the legal tangle into which he had been thrust, now was the time to know it.

"And a good lawyer, special if he's not too scrupulous, can usual find a way out of most anything, I guess," Pete grinned, but without mirth. "Whether Henders is a good lawyer or not, I don't know, but I reckon he won't have many scruples, anyway."

It was late afternoon when he reached town, and nothing untoward had happened to mark the ride. But when he climbed the stairs to Hender's office, it was to find a card pinned to the door, announcing that the attorney was out of town and would not be back for several days.

At the foot of the stairs a loiterer eyed him and nodded affably.

"Lookin' for Henders?" he asked.

"I was, yes. But it says he's out of town."

The loiterer grinned.

"Reckon that's so, in a way of speakin'....Henders, he's sort of indulgin' in the cup that cheers. Goes

on a bender every six months, and for mebby a week he's out o' town, all right."

With this frank betrayal of an open secret, the loiterer grinned and moved on. Pete hesitated. If he did find Henders, the lawyer would be of no use to him now. But he had ridden all the way into town because he had to find some things out, and find them pronto. Then his eye caught something which for the moment drove all thought of lawyers from his mind.

It was Hazel Dexter, walking along the street in the company of a man. The man was tall, raw-boned, with a rather homely face which was made almost good looking by the animation in it now as he looked down at his companion. Seeing the way he looked at her, and the way she looked up at him in turn, Pete felt a quick stab of jealousy. For she seemed, if anything, more pretty today than when he had seen her before.

They stopped across the street; and after a moment, lifting his hat, the man turned in through an office door, above which Pete saw a sign: "Zane Zackett, Lawyer." Evidently that was Zane Zackett himself, and his homeliness, his unpretentious sign, somehow suggested honesty and ability.

Pete was nearly across the street before Hazel looked up and saw him. He saw the sudden whiteness in her cheeks, followed by a deeper touch of color as he raised his hat; then she waited for him to speak.

"I was just wantin' to thank you for that message you sent by your father," he said gravely. "It was right kind of you."

There was a sudden glad light in her eyes which sent his pulse to pounding.

"Then you—he wasn't to give you the message unless you gave a good answer," she said a little hesitantly.

"I didn't give any answer—yet," Pete explained. "But he gave me the benefit of the doubt. Which I sure appreciated."

Her face was a little troubled now.

"But surely, in a matter of that sort—"

"I rode in to get some expert advice," he explained. "Sometimes givin' an answer isn't quite so simple as it sounds. Legal advice, I guess they call it. Would you recommend this Zane Zackett as one to give such?"

"Mr. Zackett is as honest a man as you'll ever find, if that's what you want to know," she agreed. "And I think he's thoroughly competent."

"Thanks," Pete nodded. He wanted to keep on talking, but he could think of no good excuse for doing so, and as she was already turning away, he lifted his hat and passed through the door.

There was another stairs to climb. A cheerful whistle through an open door showed him the way, and he found Zane Zackett sitting, feet propped on a desk, whittling at a stick. He turned, glanced up, and removed his feet from the desk, rising to set out a chair.

"CAUGHT me red-handed, didn't you?" he grinned. "As a lawyer, I should be immersed in a stack of papers, and keep you waiting at least ten minutes while I pored over them, to make you believe that my services were very much in demand. As a matter of fact, most disputes in this country are settled directly, and Boot Hill gets the loser. What can I do for you?"

"Give me some advice, I hope," Pete replied. "I'm Pete Prentiss."

Zackett's eyes narrowed. Then he nodded.

"I'm interested, Prentiss," he confessed, "very much so. And fully at your service."

"I've had you described to me as an honest man," Pete added. "Which is what I want."

"Somebody's been kidding you." The old grin returned to Zackett's face. "A lawyer can't afford to be honest if he wants to eat. But you intrigue my curiosity. Who described me so flatteringly?"

"Miss Dexter."

"Then I am flattered indeed. I value her opinion very highly. And you may be pleased to know that she seems to like you, despite certain

factors which are against you." He surveyed Pete keenly again. "You're not at all like the popular conception of what you'd be."

"I hope not," Pete agreed fervently. "Now, give it to me straight. Just what have you heard about the terms of the will giving me the Box 8, and the conditions under which I have accepted it?"

"Certainly. Your not too well beloved uncle, according to the story, left you the Box 8 on condition that you should continue his grinding-into-the-dust policies with all the harshness which he instituted. It is commonly understood that you accepted it on those conditions. So you can see why you'd be unpopular."

"I can see," Pete agreed a little grimly. "You haven't seen the will?"

"Old Grasp 'n' Grab—pardon me—your uncle never trusted me with any of his legal business."

"Grasp 'n' Grab is all right with me. I came in to see Henders, and ask for legal advice; he has the will. But the conditions are substantially as you have heard. And I legally agreed to them, it seems. Only, when I did, I didn't know what those conditions amounted to. I understood that I was to keep the old crew on, and not to sell any part of the ranch for five years, but I didn't dream of what was involved."

Zackett whistled.

"That puts a new face on affairs, for a fact."

"Sort of. You didn't hear anything else?"

"Nothing relevant that I can think of."

"Not, for instance, that the Box 8 goes to Cold Deck Jones, my foreman, if I fail to comply with those conditions to the final letter?"

Zackett stared, leaning forward. His face was sober now.

"Not a whisper of anything like that. Say, you are caught pretty bad, aren't you?"

"It seems to shape up that way," Pete confessed. "Five of my neighbors, headed by Tim Dexter, rode out to see me this morning. They wanted me to be neighborly—or else! I didn't give them an answer. I couldn't! I want you to give me one. Is there any way that I can be decent, and get away with it?"

For answer, Zackett leaned forward suddenly and held out his hand.

"I'll have to think about that, but I'd like to shake hands with you. You're a man—even if you are in a devil of a fix."

Pete returned the grasp heartily.

"Thanks," he said. "But how about it?"

ZACKETT pondered a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"If I were a crooked lawyer, I'd advise you to fight it in the courts, or to go ahead, as owner, and do as you pleased," he said. "But you came to me as an honest man, and besides, I'm supposed to be giving you legal advice as a lawyer. If you get out of this alive and still own the Box 8, I'd like to merit your consideration for further legal advice when needed."

"Then you don't think I can do it?"

"I don't see how. Henders, meaning no disrespect to my fellow barrister, is no shining legal light. But your uncle was a careful man, and—"

"As it happens, he wasn't my blood uncle. I was an adopted child, though he didn't know it."

Zackett grinned and extended his hand again.

"That deserves another shake, for really removing the taint." He sobered. "It makes the situation even worse, however. As I was about to say, old Grasp 'n' Grab was a very careful man, and Blake and Blake are among the ablest attorneys in the country. That will, and what you signed, are almost certain to be air-tight. If it came to a court fight, with that clause in it, you'd lose, after having signed it, and Cold Deck would win, almost certainly. Not that it'd ever be likely to come to a court fight."

"I know what you mean."

"I judge you do, since you've met your foreman."

"I can't lease, lend, give away or sell any water to my hard-pressed neighbors, then—except at the rates

already laid down by Grap 'n' Grab?"

"That's the devil of it. I can see that you want to, and I'd like to tell you how to do it legally. If you did, Cold Deck would probably kill you. But I can't even see any legal way of getting around it."

Pete stared thoughtfully at the desk in front of him. Zackett stood up and paced around the room.

"Here I get a chance to do something, and I'm a broken reed," he exploded. "Though if folks knew the facts—"

"This is strictly confidential."

"Yes, I can see that. If Cold Deck even suspected what you wanted to do, he could take over the ranch, legally, and it would be unhealthy for you, too. I don't see what you can do."

Pete stood up.

"I'm kind of stumped myself," he confessed. "But I'm not ready to admit that I'm licked—not yet."

CHAPTER IX

Old Slewfoot

PETE spent the night in town, staying in a hotel room, and he was in the saddle before most people were awake. It was still cool, though with promise of a hot day later on, and even at that hour there was no sign of dew on the grass. Dew didn't come much during drought years, when even the air was wrung dry of all moisture.

And that was the bad part of it. The water shortage for a lot of his neighbors was becoming acute. A good rain would relieve the pressure, at least for a while. But there was no prospect of rain, any more than there had been a few days back.

Pete started as a shadow fell athwart his path. Van Sice had ridden out from a side trail, and his usually glum face was set in harsher lines than usual this morning. His greeting was characteristic.

"Made up yore mind, hombre?"

"Good morning, Van Sice," Pete nodded. "I'd like to talk to you."

"It ain't mutual. We asked yuh a question yesterday, to be answered yes or no. And yuh didn't answer. Since then, yuh been to town, and had plenty of time to think it over. I'm askin' yuh once more—just once more—is it yes or no?"

"And if I don't happen to be ready to say yet?"

The dour visage became even more grim.

"If yuh don't say yes, times like these, it means no. I'm givin' yuh a chance to say yes. If yuh don't say it—why, yuh got a gun. So have I. And either I'm gettin' rid of the poison in Poison Valley, or else I'll be out of my own troubles. It's up to you."

"This business of wanting to kill me seems to be a habit around here," Pete sighed. "I don't want to fight you, Van Sice."

"Yuh ain't going to have no choice," was the bitter retort. "Yuh got a gun. Either yuh say yes, or yuh use it—and I shoot you down just like the dog I reckon yuh are, anyway. Now answer!"

There was no arguing with the man, Pete saw; he was in a mood for action. But he was at least bluntly straightforward and fair about it, with no shooting from ambush.

It hadn't been so long since Pete had got rid of his own gun. Just a few weeks back, when the need for eating had become rather more important than going heeled. Not long enough to forget how to use it. That was the trouble.

He had voluntarily sold the gun for what it would bring, not alone for the money, but to be rid of a weapon. It had come to him that he was growing to depend rather too much on having a gun at his hip. In the parlance of the country, he was gun-handy. With him, it was an easy, effortless job to draw and aim and fire before most other men could get a gun clear of leather. And when he aimed, the bullet went true. It would be easy, far too easy, to develop into a man who lived by and for his gun.

VAN SICE didn't know about that, of course. He was probably aware, as was most of the valley

by now, that Pete had hit the country looking like a tramp and packing no hardware. Which was apt to lead to the illusion that Pete didn't get on very well with a gun, and might breed a dangerous overconfidence. Though Pete had a hunch that Van Sic would go ahead with his plan, even if he knew how dangerous his antagonist might be.

"Well?" Van Sice snapped again. "I'm tired of foolin'. Draw!"

The man was fast, Pete saw, as his own hand slapped for his gun—far faster than he had expected the stolid Dutchman to be. The thing that Pete aimed to do was tricky, made doubly risky against such speed. He didn't want to hurt Van Sice, merely to disarm him. But to shoot a gun out of a man's hand was apt to be fraught with accidents—for the other fellow.

The reports blended almost together, a roaring blast of savagery which tore at the peaceful afternoon like gripping talons. Pete heard the whistle of the Dutchman's bullet, and knew that his own had been almost too slow. Then he saw Van Sice, staring alternately from his own shattered, bloody hand to the gun lying in the dust of the road, and cursing horribly.

Pete watched grimly. That glancing bullet had struck Van Sice's gun, all right, but in tearing it from his grasp, the bullet had glanced and ripped upward through closed fingers and the fleshy part of the hand as well. It was a bad mess, and it would be a long time before Van Sic could use that hand for such a purpose again. But it would be worse than useless for Pete to protest that he had tried only to disarm him without hurting him.

"Damn you," Van Sice panted. "So that is yore answer, eh? Well, when I tell the rest of the valley, see if yuh can kill them—you and your crew of gunnies. Or will yuh take another shot and stop my tongue, eh?"

Pete shrugged resignedly and returned the gun to holster as Van Sice, blood dripping from his hand and leaving a spotted crimson trail across the grass, turned and rode furiously back across the fields again. It was still a few miles to the Box 8, but the news would probably travel faster than he could. Pete felt no elation at his victory, only depression. It would have been better if he had taken the wound. But Van Sice hadn't been shooting with the idea of merely disarming or wounding.

He glanced up sharply at a fresh clatter of hoofs, eyes narrowing a little as he recognized the newcomer, gun at hip and rifle held across the saddle. Bob Dexter's eyes were glowing to match the excited color of his cheeks as he drew up.

"So you shot the Dutchman, eh?" he demanded, and there was a blending of amazement and anger and admiration in his voice. "He's about the fastest man on the draw in these parts—aside from yore Box 8 crew."

"He drew on me," Pete sighed. "I didn't have no choice."

"I saw it," Bob confirmed. "You're gun-handy, ain't you?"

"I guess you might call it that."

"He'll sure have it in for you now. He's that way. Though you got it comin', I reckon, when you show yore colors that way."

"You out gunnin' for me again today, too?" Pete's eyes strayed to the rifle.

The boy shook his head.

"Nope, not you—not today. Mebby you need killin', but if the Dutchman can't do it, I'd look funny tryin', wouldn't I? Besides, Dad and Sis seem to think you're kind of a decent sort, in some ways. I'm keepin' my eyes peeled for Old Slewfoot today."

"Who's Slewfoot?"

BOB turned his horse and jogged along beside him. His face, for the moment, was animated, friendly.

"Slewfoot's the worst renegade in these hills, next to Cold Deck," he asserted. "He's a big grizzly that's got the taste of beef and horse meat in his mouth, and he kills for the fun of killin'. You know. Mostly a grizzly don't eat much meat, and is plumb peaceful if you leave him alone. But when they do go bad—

then they're the worst sort of devils."

"Yeah, I know. And Slewfoot's bad, is he?"

"He's the biggest grizzly in the country. Some folks say he'll go way over half a ton. He must've killed two-three hundred head of stock the last year or so. He's been hunted a good many times, but though I reckon he must have a lot of lead in his hide by now, it just makes him that much meaner, is all. He's bad, and he's unexpected as a bug in yore boot. You never know when or where he'll turn up. I found his track in the mud, down in the river this mornin'. One of the holes that's dryin' up. He's been there to scoop up the fish that was trapped there. When I saw that, I went back and got the rifle."

"Sounds sensible," Pete conceded. "But you wouldn't go picking a fight with such a customer, would you? He'd be considerable worse than me."

"I don't know," Bob answered honestly. "I'm pretty good with a gun, though not fast on the draw like you or the Dutchman. But I'm not sure whether I'd tackle Old Slewfoot if I had a chance or not. About a month ago, six men had him cornered, along with ten dogs. Slewfoot, he turned on them, killed seven of the dogs and clawed two others up so bad they had to be shot. He pulled one horse down, and the only thing that saved his rider was that he kind of fell under the horse and got busted up some, and Slewfoot didn't stop to finish him. But he got away. Only thing is, if he sees you he's twice as apt to start trouble as not to."

"He sure sounds like a bad customer all right," Pete agreed. He had seen one or two renegade grizzlies in his day, and knew just how bad a menace they could be. Ranging over a wide hunting ground, they might kill a horse one day, and be feasting on a fresh-killed steer the next day, forty miles away.

"You'll know his mark if you run across it," Bob went on. "His right front paw was caught in a trap when he was only a cub, and he chewed it all up to get out. It's kind of spraddled out and formless now, all slewed around. That's one reason he can't be caught in a trap now."

"Well, you got rid of one renegade the other day," Pete grinned. "Maybe you're lucky that way."

"This country's too full of renegades, though," Bob said seriously. "And anyway, I had help with that one." He pointed. "There's the K over T. Our land."

Pete pulled to a stop to have a look. From there, a good part of the Dexter range could be seen, and in normal years he knew that it would show up as one of the finest ranches, for its size, to be found anywhere. Off beyond it was the border of the Box 8, and the contrast was startling.

Not far away, on the Box 8, was that narrow canyon where the river had been impounded. The cool gleam of its lake could be seen from there; the dark depths of the canyon, with only a trickle of water in it, where the river should normally run full and free.

The Box 8 was green, well watered. The K over T was parched and dying. Even that trickle of water which got past the dam was all sucked up by thirsty ground before any of it reached the neighboring ranch below.

Down there still stretched the line of willows, interspersed with occasional clumps of cottonwoods, to mark the normal course of the stream. But, save for now and then a deep pool where a little water still showed, green and scummy, it had become a river of dust.

EVEN the leaves of the willows and other trees were turning an untimely yellow, drooping like a flag from which the breeze has turned, hanging dejected in defeat.

"There used to be mighty good trout fishin' along down there," Bob said grimly. "I've caught many a nice mess—in the old days. But most of them are dead now, or dyin'. Them that's left in the pools can't live in such stuff. The water ain't fit to drink."

Before that blunt indictment Pete felt himself go cold with a mingled fury and helplessness. Water, a vast surplus of it, which was doing no one any good—water on his own ranch. If he'd just let a little of it run free, it would save the Dexters and the other ranchers down below. They didn't have to cross the Box 8 to get out to town, as some of their neighbors from beyond the far borders did. But by means of that legalistic thing called water rights on a stream, the Box 8 was choking them as surely as it was choking the others.

Suddenly Bob turned to him, and he was just a boy now, pleading for the thing he loved, for those he loved.

"You can see how it is," he said. "And gosh, it ain't fair to hog all that water when you don't need it. I know what old Grasp 'n' Grab was doing it for—he wanted to freeze us out. But you can be decent. Let us have some water. Please! If—if you don't do it, then you're just plain no good!"

CHAPTER X

Damn Your Dam!

POISON Valley! Pete lay long awake that night, haunted by the look on the boy's face, the bitter indictment in his voice. If you don't do it, then you're just plain no good! There had been anger, and hopelessness, and above all disappointment in Bob's face, as he had watched Pete ride away without answering—a disappointment that the man had failed to come up to his hopes and expectations. Pete had had a chance to make a friend, in that moment, and he knew that he had failed.

Failed, because this was Poison Valley, and the poison which had eaten like a canker at the heart of old Grasp 'n' Grab was spreading, blighting everything it touched, a killing thing in a once green valley.

Pete had had a few days, before he reached here, of high hopes, of dreams and ambitions, when he thought what he would do with a fine ranch. Now he had the ranch—and what could he do with it, while that poisonous curse remained?

It would be a simple matter to release a little water, but to do so would turn the Box 8 over to Cold Deck, and there would then be no more water. Pete could do something like that and fight on the side of the ranchers. But all to no purpose. For the weight of legality, as well as of ruthlessness and guns, would rest with Cold Deck.

So far, he had been able to hold at least a little of that ruthlessness in check, but even that couldn't last much longer. Showdown was on the way, coming fast. Every new incident added fuel to the smoldering fire which would become a raging inferno at any moment. And the worst of it was that he could see no way to fight.

With the new day he rode north, alone as usual. Cold Deck and the crew, he had a feeling, regarded him as a little queer, but he was leaving them alone, and they left him alone as well. The news of his clash with the Dutchman the day before had spread, and while no one made any comment, Pete could see that Cold Deck was pleased. If he had had doubts as to what course Pete might follow, that seemed to have pretty well resolved them.

"And it just gets me in tighter than ever where I don't want to be," Pete growled to himself. "Hang Grasp 'n' Grab, anyway. I wish he'd left me alone."

By now he was getting a pretty good idea of the Box 8 and its vast resources. One thing was all too apparent. That impounded water could not be used to any good purpose so far as the present Box 8 was concerned. It was at the lower end of the ranch, and could not be lifted to irrigate any of it. Of course, if the K over T and various other small ranches were added, that would be a different story.

Far off, something caught his eye, and Pete turned to look. It was a herd of cattle, moving toward the Box 8. A couple of hundred head,

with six or seven horsemen coming along behind them. His interest quickened. That, he knew, was the Lazy Q off there, belonging to MacCafferty. To reach the railroad, or get out at all, it was necessary for MacCafferty to cross the Box 8 or else go far out of his way.

But it wasn't likely that he had any intention of trying to cross the Box 8 today. Off here there was a smaller creek which, instead of flowing to join Silver River, ran in almost the opposite direction. Its headwaters were in the Box 8, but through long centuries it had watered the Lazy Q on its way to the sea, until, not so long ago, at Grasp 'n' Grab's orders, the creek too had been dammed.

Now the Lazy Q was desperate for water, and MacCafferty, having received no reply to the demand which he had helped to present two days before, was taking things into his own hands. They were aiming to cross the line and have some of that water.

It was a good two miles yet before the cattle would reach the dam, but only half that far to the border between the two ranches. Pete watched the oncoming herd in sudden hopefulness. If they could get some of the water, it was all right with him. He was all for them.

But they wouldn't get it without a fight, he could see that. Cold Deck was taking no chances at such places as this. Someone had been on watch, and now, echoing far across the country, sounded three shots from a rifle, a brief pause, then two more. Almost at once, from the distance, came a reply.

BEFORE the cattle could reach the water there would be Box 8 riders there to intercept and turn them back. Pete saw them gathering —three, four, five, six men. The last was Cold Deck himself, unmistakable even at that distance.

By then the cattle had crossed the line, marked with a barbed wire fence. MacCafferty and one of his men had boldly cut the wires and thrown them back; then they poured the eager herd across. Now it was a race for the water, and it would be a close one.

Grimly, back out of sight himself, Pete sat and watched. He wouldn't help his own crew—and that was grim irony, to call them his—and he couldn't help MacCafferty, nor order Cold Deck to let them come. Cold Deck wouldn't accept any such order, and if Pete did give it, he would claim the Box 8 for his own from that very moment. And the worst of it was that Cold Deck could make his claim stick.

The Box 8 crew advanced at a steady trot, dust rising behind them from the overly dry ground. Cold Deck, riding a little in advance of the others, called out a warning. The Lazy Q gave no indication that they had heard, but as guns caught the sunshine, more guns were in their hands. A shot echoed and reechoed thinly across the valley.

That first shot had been in the nature of a warning, for no one had been hurt. There would have been bloody business to follow, but at that moment the cattle created a diversion. The herd was direly thirsty, for MacCafferty hadn't moved until forced to by circumstances. Now, at the smell of water, they suddenly broke into a wild run which was little short of a stampede. The efforts of Cold Deck and his men to turn them was useless; and, nearly ridden down, they got out of the way.

Reaching the impounded water, the cattle took the most direct route. Half of the herd thundered straight across the dam of boards and dirt which had been thrown up, in the form of a U, three or four feet high, across the creek and reaching back a hundred feet on either side. Before that crashing impact, the boards broke into kindling wood, the heaped-up dirt was churned by pounding hoofs; then the dam was wrecked, the new lake pouring out, gouging away the last barrier, and swinging madly into its old channel again.

The bellowing of the herd had ceased as quickly as it had begun.

Knee-deep in water, they were drinking thirstily. The opposing parties of cowboys pulled up to glare at each other.

"This is plain trespassing and destruction of property, MacCafferty!" Cold Deck's voice came clearly to Pete's ears, across the intervening space.

"Call it what you please, and be damned to you!" MacCafferty rasped. "I'm not the man to stand by and see my cattle die of thirst. And if you build that dam up again, I'll shoot down the first man that goes to work on it—and every one that follows him!"

In that moment, Cold Deck was impressive. He did not point out that the Box 8 owned the water rights and could do as it pleased with the water. Nothing like that. His silence was far more ominous than words.

"There ain't nothing more to do here today, boys," he said. "There'll be plenty—later."

He turned and led the way back, leaving MacCafferty and his herd in possession, with water flowing once more along the creek bed, down to the Lazy Q. They had won the initial skirmish; the Lazy Q would have water again for several days, at least. But the withdrawal of the Box 8 was far from a retreat, or a defeat.

Watching, bleak-faced, Pete recognized it for what it was. The whole valley would take this as his answer to the demand made upon him; an answer which would hasten the inevitable showdown.

CHAPTER XI

Death in Flood

IT WAS significant, Pete realized, that Cold Deck made no report to him that evening concerning what had happened that day. Cold Deck Jones was foreman, and he figured that he had the right to run the Box 8 to suit himself. Moreover, he intended to do so.

In his own room, Pete cleaned and oiled his gun thoughtfully. That might be a way to settle this thing—with guns.

A few days before, he would have been shocked at the notion of killing a man to settle a dispute. But events were on the march. The ownership of the Box 8, and the policies entailed, hinged on a personal struggle between him and Cold Deck. If one of them was removed, that would settle the thing, once and for all. And he wasn't the man to sit idly by much longer and allow a bad situation to develop into an infinitely worse one. He had been catapulted into this fight unwittingly. Since he was in it, he'd carry through.

If it had come to a showdown battle between himself and Cold Deck, Pete knew how heavy the odds were. He was gun-handy, and all the valley knew that now, after his clash with the Dutchman. Which would make Cold Deck that much more wary.

But Cold Deck, from all reports, was the best gunman in the country. The Dutchman, while good, had never been classed in the same category. Cold Deck was known to have killed four men in as many years, in open gun battles. As the story went, he hadn't gone out of his way to provoke them, nor had he possessed any advantage, initially, over his adversaries. And at least two of them had been gunmen of repute, anxious to enhance their own prestige over a foe of such caliber.

The results spoke for themselves. Pete wanted to go on living. He had a lot of things to live for now, if he could work them out. So he wasn't going to press such an issue, just to bring about a decision. But pretty soon the clash must inevitably come between himself and Cold Deck, and when it did, things would be apt to happen fast.

There was almost a full moon tonight. And he was in no mood for sleep. Pete slipped the gun into his holster. The rest of the ranch appeared to be asleep, but he wasn't sure even about that. He always had the feeling, these days, that he was quartered with a crew of big cats—cats who could sleep, yet always keep one ear cocked, alert and on the prowl when least expected.

A couple of hours' riding brought

him to the big dam. Pete couldn't have said, consciously, just why he had headed this way tonight, unless he was riding a hunch. It was down here, below, that the K over T lay, seemingly asleep under the moon, some of the garish, blistering dryness of the drought blotted out under this more kindly light. And down here lived the Dexters, with whom he'd like to be neighborly. Tim Dexter, Bob Dexter—and Hazel Dexter.

Pete left his horse and started back up the canyon toward the dam on foot, crossing the river bed, dry in most places even this close to the dam, and climbing part way up the steep hillside on the other slope. A few ancient cattle paths wound along here; brush and scattered trees clung where the slope was not too steep. Dusk lay heavy in the bottom of the canyon.

THE dam itself filled the narrow, rocky-sided gorge to a height of nearly two hundred feet. It looked, from down below, like an impregnable fortress, set there where the river had won a hard way down through the long centuries. Most of it was built of steel and concrete, and it was readily apparent that an engineer who knew his business had been in charge of its construction. Grasp 'n' Grab had never been a man to pinch a penny when its spending could buy power for himself.

But up toward the top it was different. About ten feet of the dam had been rather hastily added, to judge by appearances; the addition was set back upon the main concrete structure. Evidently the river had poured down more water than Grasp 'n' Grab had counted on when building the dam in the first place.

His plan, Pete judged, had been to hold back the river this year, forcing the ranchers below to come to his terms, then to let it spill over when it reached the top. Somebody had miscalculated, and it had been seen that it would overflow and defeat its own purpose. There had been no time to build a solid addition, so this temporary check of boards and other stuff had been erected, and it was serving well enough.

But a few sticks of dynamite, properly planted, could tear out that addition and let plenty of water pour over again—plenty to relieve the situation down below!

It was a wonder that someone hadn't tried it before now—

Pete's eyes narrowed suddenly. Unless he was very much mistaken, someone was getting ready to try it now. He was beginnnig to understand the hunch which had drawn him here tonight. He had smelled trouble, without quite understanding it.

The ranchers down below had waited as long as they could, anxious to avoid trouble if that were possible. Trouble with the powerful, ruthless Box 8 would inevitably be bad for them, more especially since it had the law on its side. They had hoped that the new comer would be decent, had given him every chance. Now, believing that to be hopeless, they were ready—someone was—to do what had to be done so that they could continue to exist.

Again Pete didn't blame them. He admired whoever it was that had the courage to climb up there and set a blast, and he was glad that it was going to be done. That would solve the water problem down here for a few weeks, as the cattle had solved it up above today. Any delay which would postpone a general blow-up was welcome, for time might bring some better solution.

The scrunch of a boot heel on rock caught his ear. It wasn't a big sound, but it drew his eyes, and what he saw caused him to stiffen. Off on the other side of the gorge, moving carefully, half in shadow, was Cold Deck. Moonlight rippled in little splashes along the blued length of the rifle barrel which he held. He was watching where the trespasser climbed, high above them, getting ready to kill him before he could set off the blast.

Neither of them had seen Pete, nor suspected his presence. He glanced upward again, and his blood seemed this time to freeze.

It wasn't a man climbing out there, though at this distance, and clad in overalls like a man, with an old felt hat drawn down over her hair, she looked enough like a man so that Cold Deck, from where he stood, would never know the difference. But it was Hazel Dexter who had come here tonight, alone, to do this thing.

Another step or so and she was out of Pete's sight, still working toward her objective. Cold Deck, too, was out of sight, behind a ledge of rock off across the gorge. Hazel would climb some more, up there, before reaching a good point to place the charge, and Cold Deck was moving to a vantage point where he would be ready to shoot to kill. One well-placed bullet, and the girl would fall outward, never knowing what had hit her, and plunge for two hundred feet into the gorge below.

That Cold Deck would shoot to kill Pete had not the slightest doubt. He would not, in all probability, even suspect that he was shooting at a woman. And he'd aim, not alone to take no chances on damage to the dam, but to give a grim warning to any others who might have such a thing in mind.

PETE'S mind was racing. Up there, with the suck and swirl of the mighty waters in her ears, it was doubtful if Hazel could hear him if he did call to her. Off on the far side of the gorge, behind that projecting cliff, Cold Deck wouldn't be apt to hear, either.

Pete was running, climbing, with a panting desperation of haste which he had never known before. The time was desperately short in which he could get to Hazel before she reached that point and started to set the charge which she already had nearly ready, in a package in her hand. But he had to do it, before that rifle down below had a chance to speak—

There was a pretty good path up here, which helped. He moved almost by instinct, since he had never climbed here before. Boulders jutted along the path; scraggly trees and brush clung there at intervals. The thunder of the waterfall, up here was far greater than it had been from lower down. He had a glimpse of a silver spray, weaving there in the shimmering moonlight, a faerie fancy as it danced and spun, but he had no time nor thought for the beauty of it tonight. In his mind was the blasting horror of a broken body, plunging out and down to destruction.

If he could have seen Cold Deck then, to line him in his sights, Pete would cheerfully have shot to kill, whether from ambush or not would have made no difference. For Cold Deck was preparing to do exactly that in turn, careless as to who his victim might be. But he wouldn't be able to see Cold Deck until he reached Hazel's side, if then, and it would be too late then.

Pete's breath was a torture in his overstrained lungs, his legs felt leaden as he forced them to run up this slope where even to climb slowly was a task. But he was almost up there, ready to strike off on the side path, to work his way out on the main top of the dam as Hazel was doing ahead of him.

The jutting shoulder of a mighty rock, the sweeping branches of a pine tree which had weathered the years, lifting its head toward the light—these things had hidden her from down below, from his vision and that of Cold Deck alike. But she would soon be past them, out there at the middle of the damn, caught in the pitiless light of the moon as it reflected back from the water-whitened planks, while she stopped, all unsuspecting, to fix the charge and light the fuse.

It was slippery here, where a fine mist of spray constantly splashed and made a thin film of moss underfoot. Above him towered the planking, holding back a massy wall of water. This was a place to creep, as she had done, to proceed with extreme caution. A slip, a misstep here, would send him plunging out, falling—past that massive shoulder of granite, or down through the feathery-looking fringes of the pine, hur-

tling down and down, to strike on the rocky floor far below.

FOR all that, Pete was running as desperately as before, careless of the footing. The weaving, shimmering mist of moon and spray was in his eyes, half blinding him, and the overhanging shadows of the dam and rocky walls hid her from his sight. Then he saw her—stepping out into the light, stopping, and without waste of time starting to place what she carried there at the foot of the planking.

His shout was a feeble thing in his throat, a raspy whisper that hardly reached his own ears. One hasty glance below showed him nothing. Cold Deck would be somewhere off down there, coolly taking his time, but from up above here it appeared like a pit of darkness. And the pit held things as slimy as the moss under his feet.

A tiny flicker of flame showed where Hazel was lighting a match, applying it to the fuse. Pete hurled himself the last few feet, grabbed her roughly and jerked her toward him. At the same instant something smashed hard into the planking where she had been a moment before—something which tore through the planking with the venom of a striking rattlesnake.

Pete heard her gasp, in surprise and terror, as he staggered back, back toward the shadows. Another vicious something snarled and whanged into the planking; then they had reached the covering gloom. For an instant he stopped, panting, and saw her face, close to his own, the terror and horror in her eyes as she realized what those smashing things had been. She recognized him, of course, but there was no time even to think of that.

"Get back—quick!" she gasped. "I lit it—a lot closer than I intended to."

Pete knew what she meant. She had been lowering the flame of the match to the fuse when he'd catapulted upon the scene and grabbed her. Her hand had jerked, still blazing, onto the partly coiled fuse, and had hung there, close up to the cap, instead of near the end where she had intended to light it.

Now it would be only a question of heartbeats until the shortened fuse would reach the cap and the dynamite would go off, tearing a gaping hole in the plank superstructure which towered above them. When that happened, with the push of the mighty lake behind it, the whole plank structure would be shoved away like kindling wood, with thousands of tons of water pouring irresistibly behind it.

Hazel tried to run, and slipped. Pete caught her, jerking her back, and began running himself. It wasn't far now—just a few more steps. But he felt, rather than heard, the thunderous tear of the dynamite; then, as he stood and bodily heaved her forward to the safety of the bank beyond, his own foot slipped with the effort.

The next instant, like the crushing hand of doom, he saw the whole plank wall toppling on him. Then he was in it, a churning maelstrom of water which was plunging madly for the canyon floor below, taking him with it like a chip on the flood.

CHAPTER XII

Mistake to Rectify

THERE was no time to think. To survive or perish would be more a matter of chance than anything which he could do, though the will to live, to fight on, was strong within him. The memory of Hazel in his arms, even for that brief and turbulent moment, seemed to lend him new strength.

The mighty force of that ten-foot wall of water which had been so suddenly released was surging outward and downward in a cataract to rival Niagara. The water was almighty now, a living, surging thing which laughed at the boards which had held it back for so long, which tore them to kindling wood and tossed them aside as things of no consequence. It swept out and past, was under and all around Pete as he went with it,

a cushioning blanket as he reached the channel below.

Had he fallen out and down of his own accord, he would have hit on a rocky bottom which extended clear across the canyon. But, twenty feet farther down, was a deep pool of considerable dimensions, kept filled by the trickle from the dam, and the hurtling force of the torrent carried him across and into this. He was going down, down, with mountains of the river pouring over and swirling around him, tossing him, buffeting him like a chip.

Even then, had he been on top of the water, his body could never have survived the shock of striking the pool. But the cushion of the cataract all around him absorbed a good deal of the force.

He had to pay for that protection in another way, however. A chip in the middle of the writhing waters, his lungs seemed about to burst, and to try to swim against the tearing forces which held him was like struggling against a nightmare.

Then the river itself caught and swirled him to the surface. Pete's head burst jerkily into the air, and he was being swung dizzily in the grip of a new and mighty whirlpool. The shore seemed to race past him, not an arm's length away, but he was helpless to do anything about it. Twice he made the bewildering round of this new race course; then abruptly he was being sucked toward the center and down.

His clutching arms caught something, and as he hung on he saw that it was one of the planks which had been a part of the dam up above—a plank at least twenty feet long. It bucked like a mad cayuse as the pool tore at it, then, finding it a bit too tough, spewed it angrily aside again. The plank and rider were shooting away downstream on the new flood tide.

Already the booming crest was ahead of him, filling the old channel of the river from bank to bank, spreading out across the flats wherever that was possible. They were just below the borders of the Box 8 now, on to K over T land, and there, for a while, there was low, nearly flat ground — ground which Grasp 'n' Grab had envisioned as being easy to irrigate from his big dam, and which now was being irrigated.

The plank, with Pete still clinging to it, veered off abruptly from riding the crest at the center of the river, and shot off at right-angles with another new tide surging out across a field. A cow, which had been bedded down comfortably for the night, struggled wildly to its feet, gazed in consternation at the sweeping water for a moment, then tail high, galloped wildly for higher ground.

Behind Pete now, the new and mighty roar of the waterfall was growing more muted, though it still reverberated up and down the valley like that of an angry giant.

He was a couple of hundred yards back from the river channel now, but even here the water was over his head, racing like a millstream. The plank began a vast, uneasy circling, but it didn't approach the still receding shore. Then, accelerating its speed again, it started being sucked back toward the main stream.

For a few minutes it hesitated, undecided, then leaped toward it like a charging bull. Clinging desperately, Pete maintained his hold. If he was shaken off, he'd be completely helpless. Already, buffeted, half drowned, and chilled to the marrow, he was past swimming, even in less boisterous waters.

It was like traveling on an express train, for the next mile or so. The dark shore was hurtling by, for here the banks were higher again, crowding the torrent together, not allowing it to spread out. Then when he was becoming so numb with cold and battered by the constant wash across him that it seemed impossible to hold on any longer, he was again shuttled off to the side, into a comparatively calm backwater.

Now was the time to get to shore, if he was going to at all. Pete knew that well enough. If the plank was sucked out again into that boiling current at mid-stream, he wouldn't be able to hold on, to ride it this time. But the walls here were rocky,

cliff-like, higher than his head. To let go, in his present numbed state, would be to sink.

THE moon was still shining down, throwing a silvery halo across the troubled waters. Someone shouted, from on the shore. Unbelievingly, Pete raised his head and looked. Yes, it was real enough. There were three or four people there, attracted no doubt by the thunder of the waterfall, which now echoed up and down the valley for miles like a great tocsin of alarm. They had come down to the river to watch, awed, and someone had seen him.

Pete raised one arm, astonished at the effort which it required, and gave a shout which in his own ears was only a feeble croak. But they had seen him, all right. He was drifting more slowly now, swinging back inshore toward them, and words came to his ears.

"—Throw him a rope—"

"It's Prentiss! Let him drown!"

Pete smiled grimly. Somebody had recognized him, and his name had started a hot argument on shore. While it waxed, he was being swept out again, circling past them. This time, probably, the pull of the main river would get him.

But it didn't. Once more the plank hesitated, and started swinging back in. They were still huddled there, still arguing, but he heard one voice clearly enough.

"I don't care if he's the devil himself. Get out of the way!"

A lariat rope launched out straight and true; the end of it fell across the plank almost beside his numbing fingers. It was, he saw, a half-opened noose, and, distrusting his ability to cling to the rope while he was pulled up, Pete made a strenuous effort and slipped an arm through the noose, then wriggled it over his head and got the other arm in. While the plank still floated near the shore, the man up above followed along, giving him enough slack in the rope to accomplish it.

Pete collapsed, almost unconscious. He was aware that the rope was being pulled in, heaving him off the plank and through the water; then he was hoisted, dripping, up the bank and on to the shore. Not too gentle hands pulled him to his feet, and he reeled there, teeth chattering, trying to steady himself. The rope was still about him, and someone pulled on it to hold him up.

"Looks like a drowned rat," was the comment.

"He's a rat, all right. Ought to have left him to finish drownin'," was the retort.

There were six or eight of them in the group now, Pete saw dimly. Then he recognized the bitter, hate-filled face of the Dutchman, as Van Sice thrust closer. His right hand was bandaged, but animosity drove him like a spur.

"Well, yuh pulled him out, Mowery," Van Sice growled. "But there'll be no livin' in this country while he goes on livin'."

"I'd 've done as much for a yellow dog," Mowery protested hotly. "I ain't a savage, I hope."

"You're a fool, is what yuh are, Mowery," Van Sice rasped. "If he was a yeller dog, I wouldn't have a word to say. We ought tuh string him up now and be done with it. Kind of redeem that rope of yores."

Pete could hear and understand well enough, though the voices seemed to come from a long way off. And for the moment he was in no shape to do anything for himself. The argument raged on.

"There's water in the river again," Mowery pointed out. "And the dam's been blown up—at least the top part of it. And he's here. Mebby he did it himself."

"If he did a thing like that, he wouldn't be caught in it," someone pointed out.

"He didn't do it," Van Sice stated positively. "In the first place, bein' a polecat like he is, he wouldn't do nothing against his own int'rests. Second, like Reid says, he wouldn't be caught if he done it himself. He was there, firin' with a rifle at whoever did set the blast. But it went off, and the water caught him."

"How about it?" Mowery pressed closer now, peering into Pete's face.

He was a tall, slim man, still under twenty-five, Pete judged, with a likeable face under a heavy thatch of dark hair. "Did you set that blast, Prentiss, or not?"

Pete shook his head. It might save his life to say that he had, but he wasn't in any mood for that.

"Nope," he said. "I didn't."

He had intended to say more, but Van Sice gave him no chance.

"What'd I tell yuh?" he growled. "A skunk don't change its stripes. Thing to do's tuh string him up and make this a decent place for decent folks tuh live in. I ain't thinkin' just about ourselves. There's women and children as well. We can't miss a chance like this."

"It don't look right to me," Mowery tried to protest, but the others had caught the temper of the Dutchman now. They shouted down Mowery's protests, dragging Pete back toward a tall, lone cottonwood which stood only a short distance away. A long, spectral lower limb reached out, a few feet above his head, and Van Sice tossed the other end of the rope expertly across it, fumbling with the water-soaked rope to bring the noose up from beneath Pete's arms and around his neck.

"Ought tuh've left him in the river," he grunted. "But we'll rectify that mistake."

CHAPTER XIII

Cold Deck Takes a Hand

STILL half numbed in mind as well as in body, there was nothing that Pete could do about it. He realized, rather hazily, that this was the time to act, to say something, try to explain. But he couldn't think clearly, his tongue jumbled the words when he tried to speak. Mowery was still protesting, angrily now, but the others paid no attention to him.

"I think it's a mistake, one you'll be sorry for," he rasped. "I never heard of such a thing."

"Yuh ain't been in this country long, Slim, and yuh'll hear of plenty other things 'fore this valley's cleaned up," one of them assured him. "It's a disagreeable job, like brandin' calves, but it's got tuh be done."

"Yeah, and the sooner the better," Van Sice growled. "Lay hold on the rope and drag him up. He ain't able to do no climbin'."

"Maybe he ain't, but the rest of you will be—climbin' them golden stairs, or mebby going the other way." The voice was even, cold, expressionless, but grimly inexorable. "Drop that rope, or I'll start the bunch of you travelin' to hell in a hurry!"

Pete listened, a little unbelievingly to that voice. So, too, did the others, as they swung around to stare into the muzzle of a levelled rifle, with the bleak face of Cold Deck Jones behind it. For a moment they hesitated, and the battered hand of Van Sice half jerked toward his hip. Then, remembering his own helplessness, growling in his throat, he raised his arms before the menace of the rifle, as the others were doing.

"That's better," Cold Deck purred. "One hell of a lot better. One of you shuck that rope off him, there."

Slim Mowery stepped forward promptly and obeyed, then caught Pete's arm as he swayed drunkenly.

"This is one time I'm glad to see you, Cold Deck," he said. "I was against stringin' him up, the shape he's in."

"Conditions can make some damn queer bedfellers, all right," Cold Deck agreed. "Never thought you'n me'd ever see eye to eye, Mowery. yuh might help get him in the saddle, over there. As for the rest of you"—he turned a chilling gaze upon them—"I'm takin' the rest of the cayuses along, to the border of the Box 8, just so yuh won't try interferin' none. The horses we're borrowin' will be sent back tomorrow."

He said nothing more, but turned and swung into the saddle of one of the clustered horses which the cattlemen had ridden there with. Mowery was assisting Pete into a saddle; and, once in, Pete found that he could ride well enough

"Thanks," he gasped. "I won't forget—what you done tonight."

"No thanks comin' to me," Mowery said noncommittally, and turned aside to where the others watched bleakly. With Cold Deck driving the extra ponies ahead of them, they turned toward the borders of the Box 8 again.

Cold Deck rode in silence, and Pete was in no mood for conversation. The foreman had saved his life, which was some matter for wonder, and a lot of things buzzed puzzlingly in the back of his mind. But he was weak as a kitten, numb with cold, and his mind didn't work well. The ride seemed endless, until they finally pulled up before the ranch house, and Cold Deck half lifted him from the saddle and carried him inside. He called, and presently Soong Lin came padding on slippered feet and knelt to start a fire in the big range.

"He's pretty cold, Soong," Cold Deck said. "Get him warm, then put him to bed."

"Can do," Soong Lin nodded, and worked expertly. Pete presently found himself wrapped in warm blankets before a roaring fire, with something hot to drink. As the devastating chill began to recede from his veins, followed by a blessed sense of warmth, Soong Lin guided him like a sleepwalker to bed.

PETE slept late the next morning, and after a good meal he felt almost as good as new again. A lot of things which had been hazy in his mind the night before were clear now. Cold Deck, of course, had seen who it was who had spoiled his aim, had seen the water catch Pete and fling him out into the merciless fury of the current. And he had followed down along the shore, to see if he could do anything. He had arrived in time to do something, but probably not at all the thing he had had in mind when starting that journey.

The fact that he had intervened to save Pete's life left his head in a whirl again. It seemed to upset a lot of his notions about Cold Deck. It would have been very easy for the foreman to remain out of sight and let that hot-headed, vengeful bunch of ranchers finish the job they had been starting. The seething fury of the Dutchman had communicated itself to them, and the bitter dregs of the poison which had gone to every corner of this valley had been about to take a natural effect.

If Cold Deck had kept out of sight, he would be boss of the Box 8 today. To win a fortune would have been that easy. But he hadn't done it.

Hazel, of course, had been on the opposite side of the river, as had all the Dexters, last night. And while the full fury of the flood was on, it would have been impossible to cross it.

But she had been safe, Pete was sure of that. He had thrown her far enough up the bank to avoid the sweep of the released flood. That had been worth all the rest.

A rare smile lighted Soong Lin's face as Pete arose from the table and stretched. Soong Lin was housekeeper, and he cooked for Pete as well. Another cook handled the grub for the crew.

"Makes me feel like a new man again, Soong," Pete said. "You sure fixed me up, last night."

"Good medicine," Soong agreed. "You belly well, now. Takee strong man to stand all that, belly much so, yes."

Soong sounded approving. Pete stepped out into the sunshine. It was still hot, still with no sign of rain anywhere in the skies. But after the events of the day before, rain, or water, wouldn't be such a pressing question in the valley for a while. And today the warmth of the sun felt good on his bones. He still shivered at the recollection of the bitter, devastating chill of those impounded waters.

Cold Deck appeared as he reached the barn. His face was blank as ever.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Fine," Pete confessed. "Thanks to you, Cold Deck."

The foreman didn't reply. His

cold stare was disconcerting. Pete spoke impulsively.

"I'm kind of wonderin' why you did it, Cold Deck."

"I'm kind of wonderin' myself," Cold Deck confessed. "It wasn't my usual way. I'm a ticket-of-leave man," he added with sudden frankness, and his lips twisted in what might have been bitter mirth. "Oxford, and all the rest of it. But the black sheep of the family, who puts himself first, every time. A man's a fool to get sentimental, ever. I felt like pullin' on the rope, and throwin' a few chunks of lead into you, to help weigh you down. Only I didn't like to see a Prentiss treated that way by outsiders."

PETER pondered that revelation. He had suspected from the first that Cold Deck was a man with background, one who might have been outstanding had he chosen to follow a different line of life. Now he had slipped back into his old, grim character again, and the past was a book once more closed.

"You was right peeved about my spoilin' your aim, there at the dam?" Pete suggested.

"I still am. I'm waitin' to hear why."

"I guess you didn't see who it was that set that charge of dynamite?"

"And I don't give a damn. It's spoiled things for quite a few weeks."

"Happened to be a woman. Hazel Dexter."

For the first time in his experience, Pete saw expression flow across Cold Deck's face—a sort of shocked incredulity.

"Hell," he protested. "I didn't know that."

"I figgered you didn't."

"It makes a difference," Cold Deck conceded, after a moment. "Yuh can't war on women."

In that, he was expressing the philosophy of the Old West. Men might be bad, as Cold Deck unquestionably was. But men, good or bad, didn't war on women—not directly.

That was one of the strange kinks in Cold Deck's character. The fact that Hazel was a woman fully explained what Pete had done. He even gave grudging approval to the act for which he had been prepared to call his nominal boss to account. You didn't shoot at a woman, even if she raised hob with your plans in such a manner as Hazel Dexter had done the night before.

On the other hand, Cold Deck was prepared to pursue the policy which he had laid down, without the slightest deviation. The fact that it meant utter ruin, possible starvation, for whole families, including women and children, meant nothing to him. That was indirect warfare, aimed primarily against their menfolks. It might be more terrible than a swift and merciful bullet, but he would carry it through to the bitter end.

Cold Deck stooped, plucked a spear of grass, and chewed reflectively for a moment. Then he spat.

"You had me wonderin' there, whether yuh was playin' the game accordin' to the rules laid down by yore uncle," he said slowly. "You're a right uncommunicative sort of a hombre, Prentiss. Like I've said before, I don't give a damn about the place itself—but if you try any double-crossin', like I figgered yuh was aimin' at last night—well, I was followin' along down the river, last night, mostly tuh see that yuh did drown, and tuh make sure of it."

He was silent a moment longer, and a subtle chill seemed to permeate the air for a moment.

"I've givin' yuh the benefit of any doubts—so far," he added softly. "But get this straight. Try to pull anything, and yuh'll be just as dead as G. G. himself."

CHAPTER XIV

Man Caught

THE plank superstructure had been completely swept away, but the rest of the dam, built of steel and concrete, had held without any trouble. There was still a considerable waterfall there today, and there would continue to be as long as Silver River ran freely. But most

of the surplus had already drained away, and down below, the flooded lowlands were again sinking back toward the normal river bed.

The soaking which they had received in the flooding was a fine thing, for grass would grow again on the parched ground. With the river flowing full again, the acute water problem was solved for the ranches down below, such as the K over T. Hazel's bold scheme, which Pete was pretty sure she had confided to no one in advance, had worked—though it had come close to being the death of both of them.

But while the problem of water for the ranchers below the Box 8 might be solved for the next few weeks or even the next few years, the situation remained unchanged for the men on the far side of Poison Valley. Proof of that was furnished before the sun had reached its zenith. Pete had just returned to the buildings, after riding to have a look at the dam, when a messenger galloped up.

"There's a big herd headin' for our line," he reported. "Looks to me like Underseth. Drivin' mebby four hundred head."

Cold Deck had appeared in time to hear the report. He had a peculiar faculty for always being on hand when trouble was stirring. Now he snapped orders.

"Round up about a dozen of the boys," he ordered. "I'll be right up there."

Silently, Pete swung into the saddle again as well. He had been hoping that showdown could be delayed for a while, after the events of the past day and night, until some sort of a solution might work itself out. But if Underseth, of the UP, was driving a big herd, anything might happen.

Underseth had been one of the men who had come to him first, hoping for a fair solution of their difficulties, but promising trouble if that was what he wanted. Underseth's UP outfit lay well back beyond the Box 8, but he was hopelessly trapped by it. To get out to town and the railroad, he had either to cross the Box 8, or take a long swing around, a trip which was almost impossible at this season of the year.

By the time they came in sight of the border, they could see the herd approaching, hardly a quarter of a mile off. Several men were riding with it, but a bigger group of Box 8 riders had gathered to meet them. Presently, Underseth himself rode ahead to meet them.

There was a dejected sag to his shoulders today, new lines of worry in his face which had not been there the other day. He looked from Pete to Cold Deck and back again, and the hopelessness in his eyes increased.

"Still chargin' five dollars a head to cross?" he asked.

"That's the price," Cold Deck replied unemotionally. "If you don't like it, you can always go around."

"I can't, and you know it," Underseth said wearily. "A couple of the creeks have gone dry, and there's no water for two days' driving. If the critters even got through alive, it'd take more'n five dollars off each of them. But two thousand dollars to drive across here, at the present price of cattle, is plain robbery."

IT WAS robbery, nothing less. Pete computed it swiftly. Four hundred head, of three and four-year-old steers. Good cattle, too, better than average for this country. But beef was low. A hunk of two thousand dollars, for toll, just to cross the Box 8, which had been an open trail for all the years till Grasp 'n' Grab had come to Poison Valley. Then the freight charges on a trainload of steers to Chicago—unless Underseth chose to sell to a buyer at Barlock—those would take mighty heavy slices out of the total.

By the time the finel check was in his hands, it would have shrunk so disastrously that the thin margin of profit would be wiped away, leaving an actual cash deficit for the years in which he had kept these cattle. Cowboys had to be paid; they had to eat. There were taxes and plenty of other cash expenses. The labor of the man who owned the ranch, the stress and strain of these bitter drought years, the grass which the

cattle ate, the investment in land—even with all these counted out, Underseth would still stand actually to lose in cash money.

That five dollars toll was calculated to eat up the very thin margin of profit and to create the deficit. Grasp 'n' Grab had figured it to a careful margin, charging every cent which the traffic would bear, but not going to a point so utterly prohibitive as to defeat his own purpose. This way, these ranchers back in here, all of them, were on the road to ruin, and they knew it. Soon they would sell out to the Box 8 at any price, rather than lose everything.

Underseth was looking at him, hopefully, speculatively. Pete's jaw clamped. He'd like to help him out—but here again was that damnable trap in which he, like the rest of them, had been caught.

"My wife's sick," Underseth went on dully. "Got to raise some money—got to raise it quick. I reckon there'll be some buyer down in Barlock."

"Kraus'll likely be there," Cold Deck agreed, and at mention of the name, Pete saw a new shadow cross Underseth's face.

"Well, we'll pay," Underseth added hopelessly. "Got to get them there soon as possible."

The Box 8 riders swung back, out of the way, as the herd came up and moved across the line. The UP punchers glanced briefly at them and away again, their own faces tight and uncompromising. They bent a little longer regard on Pete himself, as if measuring him for future reference, and he could feel the deadly hatred which ran through their glances.

The men of this country knew that they were up against a losing fight. For all that, they had put up a good battle against ever increasing odds. They had hoped that he, a newcomer, would be decent. It seemed a little worse for a new man to come in there and be as greedy as Grasp 'n' Grab had been, than it had been for old G. G. himself. He had worked for this, had won it, after a fashion. But Pete was getting it all without sweat or the lifting of a finger—or so they believed. If ever there came anoher chance at a lynching party, he had a feeling that there would be not even one dissenting voice raised.

A sudden bawl of pain and terror split the air. Off at the side, a straggler had followed the usual custom of tired dogies and had watched his chance, then slipped off into a clump of brush, hoping that the rest of the herd would keep on without his defection being noticed. It was a trick which stragglers kept persistently pulling, only to be as persistently rounded up again by the alert punchers. But they were always hopeful that it might succeed.

PETE felt the short hairs at the base of his scalp prickle. There was all the savagery, the doom of the wild, in that bawl. A moment later, like all the riders in the vicinity, Pete had turned his horse to investigate.

Underseth himself was nearest. He swept through the fringe of brush and they heard the sharp blast of his sixshooter. Then, an instant later, with a rare neigh of sheer panic, his cayuse came plunging back out from the brush, running frantically. Close behind it, covering the ground at a shambling lope which looked slow and awkward, but which was gaining on the fleeing horse at every jump, came a huge grizzly. Pete didn't need a second glance to know that here, in the flesh, was Old Slewfoot himself.

The scourge of the Silvers had been attracted by sight of the herd, and had slipped up through the brush and thickets, then had proceeded, after his bold habit, to jump on the straggler there in the brush, breaking the dogie's neck with one sweep of a powerful paw. The steer had had time for that one agonized bellow, but no more.

Set upon so swiftly by the oncoming cowmen, with Underseth losing his head momentarily as he saw an object against which he could vent his rage, and pulling his gun and firing—Slewfoot, too, already in a killing mood, had been stung to swift

and heady anger, and had promptly deserted the slain steer to wreck his vengeance upon his hunter.

The .45 bullets, if they had found their mark at all, had done little except to enrage him. All the tales which circulated up and down the valley concerning this great beast seemed now to be feeble in comparison with the real thing. Slewfoot was the embodiment of savagery, a shambling terror materialized out of the primitive past as he charged now.

The huge muscles of his shoulders bulked like a ruff, giving him the appearance of being hump-backed, his mouth was open and adrip with blood where he had torn once, and savagely, at the fallen steer, and in a few more jumps, Pete saw, he would reach the horse and pull it down with a single tremendous stroke of a paw—a stroke which could crack the neck of a four-year-old steer.

All the others were too far off to do anything. Pete alone was close enough to take a hand. He was jerking at his own revolver, even while he realized the desperation of the thing he did. A .45 was no weapon with which to go up against a killer grizzly. Even if a bullet found a fatal spot, it didn't have the knock-down power to stop that overwhelming charge. And accurate shooting from the back of a plunging horse, at a grizzly covering the ground at such speed, was out of the question. More than likely, if his bullets did anything, they would merely turn the fury of Slewfoot from Underseth to himself.

Pete shot, emptying his gun. It didn't seem to be having any effect. The grizzly was still gaining. Then, shaking his huge head like a dog pestered by flies, Slewfoot swung it, turned, and did the thing which Pete had feared — charged straight for him.

CHAPTER XV

Cattle-Buyer

HERE was half a ton of disaster heading his way, and not much that he could do about it. If those .45 pellets had had any effect on Slewfoot, it seemed to have been merely to increase his anger. Most of them hadn't taken effect at all.

Pete's horse turned as short as if it were pivoting on a dime. But it didn't attempt the impossible. Two jumps, and the charging grizzly would have been up with it, leaping into the air, smashing mighty paws down on its rump, crushing the horse to the ground like a thing of straw. And the range-wise cayuse seemed to realize this.

Whether in desperation or otherwise, it pivoted, then, instead of running as the grizzly had expected, lashed viciously out with both hind legs, in a pile-driver blow which caught the surprised Slewfoot in mid-rush and not only stopped him but sent him tumbling back.

Only the surprise had enabled the pony to get away with it, and it seemed to know this as well as Pete. That trick wouldn't work a second time, and it was losing no time in traveling out of there, taking advantage of the moments in which Slewfoot was rolling on the ground.

A very much surprised grizzly came to his feet again, but this time, perhaps dazed and confused by the punishment he had taken, he retreated, gaining a dense patch of trees and brush and plunging into its shelter before more than a bullet or so could be sent after him. Pete, breathing hard, slipped fresh shells into his gun and marveled a little to find himself alive.

His animosity forgotten for the moment, Underseth rode up, holding out his hand.

"That's some cayuse you've got there, Prentiss," he said admiringly. "First time I ever heard of that Slewfoot had to retreat."

"Guess he aims to live to fight another day," Pete said. "But this horse sure did use his head as well as his heels."

There was no chance to pursue the grizzly, unless they wanted to run the risk of several men being killed, since there was only one rifle in the party. And a wounded, cornered grizzly, slashing out savagely and

without warning from a thicket, could do devastating damage.

"Reckon I'll set out a few traps for that killer," Cold Deck remarked. "I've got an idea maybe I can fool him."

The Box 8 men rode off about their work again while the cattle kept on coming, and Cold Deck found time for a word with Pete. His voice held a note of triumph.

"It's the beginning of the end," he said. "Underseth was the hardest nut in this section to crack, as well as being the most stubborn. Now that he's come to time, the others'll have to do the same."

That was just the trouble, as Pete saw it. After the excitement of the encounter with Slewfoot had ebbed from his face, the old, haggard look had come back into Underseth's eyes. It was almost as though, in retrospect he were sorry that the grizzly hadn't caught him. That would at least have put an ending to his difficulties. This other way only served to get him deeper into the morass of ruin.

DURING the afternoon, the cattle moved steadily along. It would take them another three days to reach the railroad. Pete ate alone in the big house that night, attended by the silent Soong Lin, but he noticed that there was an extra tidbit or so at his place which had been absent at other meals, and he looked up to encounter a gleam of what might have been admiration in the usually blank eyes of the big Chinaman.

"You belly brave man," Soong said abruptly, without embarrassment. "Shoot glizzly with six-gun."

"I didn't have anything else to shoot with," Pete protested.

Soong's face relaxed in a grin.

"Most feller not shoot 'n case likee that," he avowed. "Be scaree of own hide."

"Mine's never been worth much in the past, so why should it be now?" Pete asked idly, but he meant it. The thought of Underseth and the trouble he was in haunted him.

Soong glanced quickly around, lowered his voice a little.

"Just samee, Boss Pete, you better watchee hide," he warned. "Too much fellers hate your guts."

"That's the trouble," Pete nodded. "Everybody in this country hates me. And I don't relish it."

Soong made no comment on that. Apparently he felt, as did Pete, that words were inadequate. Pete pushed back his chair.

"Guess I'll turn in and get a good sleep," he announced with sudden decision. "I'll be ridin' for town in the morning."

Something like apprehension showed in Soong's eyes again.

"Barlock mighty bad place you go these days," he warned.

"Maybe so," Pete agreed quietly. "But that's where I'm going, just the same."

"You no send Cold Deck, mebby so?"

"No. I'll do this myself."

"Cold Deck mighty big liar," Soong said softly, and padded on silent slippers back to his kitchen.

Pete stared after him, a little startled by the comment. Just what did Soong mean by that? Was it intended in the nature of a warning? But he aimed to ride to Barlock, just the same. He wanted to see Zane Zackett again.

It had been a long and weary drive from the range of the UP to the railroad, and the big herd came straggling slowly in. Underseth had ridden ahead and arranged for hay and water at the stockyards, where the herd would be kept in the pens overnight, giving them a chance to rest up before being loaded on the cattle cars. Now, as he rode again with his crew behind the herd, along the outskirts of the town, the dust of the trail seemed to have etched itself permanently into the wrinkles on his face. Underseth looked as if he had aged ten years in the last week.

A few loungers came out to the edge of the road to look at the herd, without much interest. As they neared the stockyards, one man appeared, riding a sleek, fat horse, filling the saddle almost to overflow-

ing. He, too, was sleek and fat, and Underseth's face did not change at sight of him. He had been expecting to see Kraus hereabouts, but now that the cattle-buyer had actually made his appearance on the scene, he wasn't sure whether he was glad or sorry to see him.

Kraus bought most of the stock which was sold through the railroad here at Barlock, with the exception of the Box 8 herds. Grasp 'n' Grab had invariably shipped direct to Chicago, and while he had been close-mouthed about his returns, it was a certainty that he would not have continued to do so unless it had paid him.

OTHERS drove down here, intending to ship. But Kraus generally succeeded in buying their stock, because he could pay cash, and they knew what they would receive. Likewise, it would come a few days earlier, and they always needed the money. Or they might strike a bad market and receive less. That was the gamble which won for Kraus.

Kraus dismounted and, elevating one foot to a rail, stood silently watching while the cattle were pushed into the pens. He noted how sluggishly they moved toward the watering troughs, then merely nosed at the hay. Thirsty and hungry as they were, they were too tired to eat.

He was still standing there when Underseth came up a little later. Kraus removed the straw from his mouth and nodded.

"Pretty tired," he said.

"Yeah." Underseath's voice reflected the hopelessness which had gripped him for days.

"Market's pretty bad, these days," Kraus went on. "But I'll do the best I can. Thirty a head."

Underseth's head lifted with a jerk, then sagged a little again.

"Thirty?" he said incredulously. "I figgered they was worth forty, anyway."

There was a long minute of silence, while Kraus worried his straw. Then he nodded.

"They ain't worth it," he said. "But I know how bad you need the money. I'll split the diff'rence and make it thirty-five."

Underseth was pondering that, was just about to accept, when a newcomer arrived on the scene. He was a stranger to both men, tall, well-dressed, and genial. He swung down from his horse and advanced with outstretched hand.

"Mr. Underseth?" he asked. "I'm Cleeves—cattlebuyer from Chicago. This your herd?"

Sudden hope brightened Underseth's face. Kraus scowled.

"I'm Underseth," the rancher agreed. "Mr. Kraus, here, he's just offered me thirty-five a head for the bunch."

"Thirty-five, eh?" Cleeves climbed to the top rail of the pen and looked the cattle over sagely. "I'll make it thirty-six."

Kraus scowled again. It had been a long time since he had encountered any opposition, and he didn't relish it.

"They ain't worth it, but I'll make it thirty-seven," he nodded.

Hope brightened Underseth's face. He was getting a break at last.

"I still figger they're worth more'n that," he said.

"So do I, come to look them over closer," Cleeves agreed. "Thirty-eight."

"You shootin' off hot air?" Kraus demanded. "I pay cash when I buy."

"And I pay cash when I buy," Cleeves agreed cheerfully. "It's right here in the local bank. I said thirty-eight."

Kraus considered a moment.

"Forty," he growled. "It's what you wanted, Underseth. And it's my final offer."

"In that case," said Cleeves quietly, "I'll say forty-five."

Underseth gasped. He didn't even look at Kraus again, for he never had liked the man.

"They're yours," he said.

Hope, a new spirit, was in his face as he walked back to town beside the new cattle-buyer. He'd figured the herd to be worth forty, though he hadn't expected to get quite that much. But now, at forty-five, he was not only getting what they were

worth, but enough to pay the toll to the Box 8 as well. Which still left him with a fighting chance for existence.

CHAPTER XVI

Two-Way Bluff

THE news had spread fast, and it was a sensation for a day. This new cattle-buyer had paid the best price received by anyone in a long time, and he had paid cash. It meant not only the humiliation of Kraus, who had had things pretty much his own way for a long time. It meant competition, a chance for men to make a decent living.

Little else was talked of in Barlock the next day, during which Cleeves saw to the loading out of his trainload of now rested cattle, saw them start rolling off toward Chicago. During the day, the news had spread to the far corners of the valley. Not only bad news travels fast. Good news can do the same, at times.

For one man, at least, it was not good news. Cold Deck had jerked a little when he heard it, his face betraying his incredulity. Then, in a grim silence, he saddled up and rode for town.

On the way in, he encountered Pete, riding back home again, but they did not stop to pass the time of day. It was not until half a dozen miles separated them that a sudden new thought caused Cold Deck to jerk around in the saddle again and to stare back up the road. It wasn't likely, and yet— The foreman was grimmer than ever as he rode on.

Evening had settled down when the foreman reached town. He stabled his horse, went to a restaurant and ate, then strolled down the street. As was customary, Barlock was awakening to its real activity now. Somnolent during the forenoon, doing only a desultory business in the afternoon, it always livened up as evening approached, and men from the neighboring ranches came in to wash the dust from their throats. Since this was Saturday evening, it would be the busiest night of the entire week tonight.

It took the better part of an hour for Cold Deck to locate the man he sought. Cleeves, apparently, had little time for the saloons, and he had had a busy day. No one knew just where to find him. So, on second thought, Cold Deck sought out Mr. Henders, attorney-at-law, once more soberly back in his office, and questioned him. Armed with such information as Henders had been able to furnish, he came upon Cleeves on a quiet street corner.

"Mr. Cleeves?" he asked.

Cleeves halted. At something in Cold Deck's face, his own went a little pale.

"That's my name," he confessed.

"Mine is Jones," Cold Deck informed him. "Better known as foreman for the Box 8. I understand you're a cattle-buyer."

"That's my job."

"Come on and have a drink. I'd like to talk to you."

Cleeves shook his head.

"Thanks, I don't drink. And I've just had supper."

"So have I. I understand that you paid forty-five dollars a head for those cattle of Underseth's?"

"That was the price."

"Eighteen thousand dollars, cash, way I figure it?"

"Correct."

Cold Deck's voice was a little colder.

"As it happens, Prentiss drew that much out of his bank account here in town, a couple days ago. Cash, Eighteen thousand dollars."

Cleeves looked surprised.

"Did he? That's very interesting."

"So I thought," Cold Deck said uncompromisingly. "And he turned it over to you, didn't he?"

"To me? Why should Mr. Prentiss turn any money over to me?"

"To buy these cattle with," Cold Deck snapped, and he moved so fast that Cleeves was taken utterly by surprise. He gasped a little to find a gun-barrel boring into his stomach. Behind it, Cold Deck's voice was utterly impersonal.

"I'm not blamin' you any for doing

what yuh was hired to do, hombre," he said. "But for a tenderfoot to horn in on a game he don't understand is mighty dangerous business. Either you tell me the truth, and make it quick, or I'm going to gut-shoot you. You have two ways to get out of town. One is on the train, providin' you never come back. The other is by way of Boot Hill and that way, you never come back, either."

CLEEVES' face had gone a kind of pea green. He could read the relentless purpose in Cold Deck's eyes, and he knew the man's reputation. Likewise, he knew that he didn't have a chance.

"Yeah, Prentiss hired me to do the job," he confessed. "I didn't know there was anything wrong about it, though."

Cold Deck holstered his gun.

"I reckon mebby it was within the letter of the law, as far as that goes," he conceded. "If he wants to buy critters, he can. But as far as you're concerned, that ain't neither here nor there. There's a freight train just pullin' into town. It'll stop to take on water. When it pulls out, you'd better be on it. And don't come back."

"I'll be on it," the cattle-buyer agreed. "And I won't come back."

It was Cold Deck, that night, who rode back out to the Box 8, arriving for only a little sleep. Despite that, he was up with the first of the crew, to breakfast and knock at the house shortly afterward. One glance at his face, coupled with the fact that he had plainly ridden most of the night to get back, told Pete that his little scheme had been discovered, and Cold Deck was set for trouble.

For all that, Pete's voice was as bland, his face as expressionless as the foreman's own.

"Nice morning, Cold Deck," he greeted. "I see you like to ride at night, too, when it's cool."

"Yeah, I do," Cold Deck conceded. He eyed his boss warily. "Added to that, I don't like to waste time—not when there's anything to be done."

"You're somethin' like me, that way."

"Which is about as far as we track along together, I'd say. I found out about Underseth's cattle—and you're short one cattle-buyer, who hopped the first train out of town."

"That's the trouble with outsiders," Pete said regretfully. "He knew how to play the part, but he was a tenderfoot."

"There's certain clauses in G. G.'s will, as well as in the paper you signed," Cold Deck growled.

"And I have a hunch that you figured most of those out, in the first place," Pete said equably. "They're pretty watertight, Cold Deck—just like your dam was."

"But that got blasted loose, and you're findin' a loophole here." Cold Deck's voice held a thin undercurrent of fury. "I aim to see that those conditions are lived up to—as long as you keep on livin', Prentiss."

"Are you suggestin' that I didn't live up to 'em?" Pete demanded, and his own voice was thin now. Likewise, in the way he lounged, half-crouching, alert and ready, the foreman could see that he faced a man who was gun-handy, and who had no intention of being bluffed.

Cold Deck stared for a moment, wondering whether or not the time had come for a showdown, and decided against it.

"I reckon you was within the letter of the law," he granted. "But don't make no more such mistakes. If anything like that happens again—"

CHAPTER XVII

The Best Man Deserves to Win

PETE was beinning to see a lot of things. Some of them were encouraging, and some of them the opposite. The vaunted courage of Cold Deck was not so much in evidence when he faced a man who wasn't afraid of him. And yet there were certain things that he had done, on the credit side of the ledger—

Soong Lin had chicken and dumplings for Pete's dinner, and when he saw Pete starting for the cook house

to eat with the crew, he ran out to gesticulate and decoy him toward the house, sputtering like a hen with one chick.

"Good glub go plumb wastee, no be eatee now," he complained. "And wherefore you thinkee gettee chickee, eh? Chickee no grow on ev'ly bush."

Pleased with his own humor, Soong threw back his head and laughed heartily, checking it as abruptly as he had begun.

"This chickee bling back from town special," he went on. "You eatee now, velly much yes."

Pete did full justice to the meal. Soong had gone out of his way to prepare a tasty dish for him; it was apparent to Pete, these last few days, that the big Chinaman had taken a liking to him. As the meal progressed and Soong still hovered near, Pete saw that something was troubling him as well. He wiped his mouth and pushed back his chair.

"That was a meal and a half, Soong," he declared. "And now, what's on your mind? I ought to be bolstered for most any kind of news."

Soong grinned, but the grin was gone as quickly as his laugh.

"Mebby so," he agreed. "You have row with Cold Deck, eh?"

"Sort of a little disagreement, you might call it."

Soong glanced quickly around and lowered his voice a little. There was a strange urgency in it.

"You watchee out, Boss Pete," he urged. "Men die mighty funny, Cold Deckee no likee."

"I've heard about such things," Pete agreed. "But Cold Deck saved my life the other night."

Soong laughed. But the sound was hard and brittle.

"You know why?" he asked, and lowered his voice again. "He put two men guardee dam. They follow him down river that night, see him, see you. Cold Deckee, him boss of Box 8, you big owner Box 8. With them watchee, he no can let other peoples lynchee you. Him have to save his face."

Pete stared. Soong was very much in earnest, and his news was startling and strangely disturbing. So Cold Deck had intervened to save him, merely because he dared not let it appear to the men under him that he wanted to see his employer hung, or let them know what a double-crosser he really was. That put a vastly different light on the whole affair.

"You sure of that, Soong?" he asked.

Soong Lin nodded vehemently.

"Curly, he tellee me," he explained. "He see whole thing. Cold Deckee, he not make no move to help till he see'm come close. Then he move fast, oh, yes."

"Thanks, Soong," Pete agreed. "I'll just keep that in mind."

He stood up thoughtfully, gazing out of the window. A nebulous idea had been in the back of his head for a day or so now, inspired by his success in helping Underseth. Now, all at once, he knew how to work it, saw all the important details of a plan unfold as if a blueprint had been spread before him. Any faint compunctions which he might have had about doing it were wiped away by what Soong had just told him.

What he had in mind, of course, would precipitate a crisis, was sure to bring about a clash between Cold Deck and himself—a clash which would mean life or death. But Pete wasn't worried about that. He at least had a fighting chance.

"I think I'll be riding for town again, Soong," he commented.

The cook's face was suddenly anxious.

"You gettee new scheme, maybe?" he asked.

"Maybe so," Pete agreed.

"You be mightee careful," Soong warned. "You even lide for town, Cold Deck be plenty mad."

"He'll have to stew in it, then," Pete nodded. "I'm boss of this outfit, Soong—and the sooner some people in this country find that out, the better."

Soong nodded, still gloomily.

"Mebby so," he said. "If you makee it stick."

That, Pete realized, as he swung into the saddle, was the rub. He didn't need to fail but once, and it would all be over; the Box 8, the

whole valley and all its inhabitants would be delivered into the grasping hand of Cold Deck.

"Mebby Uncle George wasn't such a bad sort, after all," Pete reflected. "I've a sort of a hunch that he found himself in the power of a man he couldn't buck—and when he tried it, he got killed. Could be."

A mile away from the ranch house, Pete turned to look back. Before he had left the house for the corral, Cold Deck had been riding off toward the north. Now a horseman who looked suspiciously like Cold Deck was galloping back toward it again.

"He's as suspicious as a calf smellin' its first bite of hay," Pete said, but did not increase his own pace. If Cold Deck wanted a showdown now, this was as good a time as any.

THERE was no further open sign of the foreman, however, as he continued the ride. It was late afternoon when Pete reached town. Leaving his horse at a stable, he hunted up Zane Zackett. The lawyer jumped to his feet with outstretched hand at sight of him.

"I'm glad to see you, Pete," he declared. "Mighty glad." He grinned. "What lawyer wouldn't be glad to see his only client, especially when he's the biggest man in the country?"

"I'm afraid you'll never make a very good lawyer, Zane," Pete grinned in turn. "You don't lie very convincingly."

"It takes practice," Zackett explained regretfully. "And I've had very little of that, so far. For some reason or other, most folks in this country seem to prefer to dispense with the middleman and deal direct. And that reminds me. From all I've been hearing, you've been in on one or two close deals."

"Close enough," Pete shrugged. "At one time I felt as though I was all washed up. But I've got an idea. And I'll need help."

"I'm a grand little helper. Something like that idea of buying a trainload of cattle? That was pretty smooth, and within the letter of the law."

Zackett fumbled on his desk, held up a telegram.

"This just came in. At the price you paid, and after deducting all expenses, you made a hundred dollars on that deal, Pete."

"Keep it for your fee," Pete instructed. "But this is a lot bigger. Listen." He leaned forward and sketched his plan in some detail, as he had worked it out on the long ride in to town. Then he leaned back. "Well?"

Zane Zackett leaned back as well and crossed his long legs. He eyed Pete pensively for a minute.

"Do you know, feller," he sighed, "I'm afraid some folks' way of looking at you is right—which, from my way of looking at it, could be a dog-gone shame."

"Could be."

"Yeah. I like that cow-country expression. It's so expressive. I'm being clear as mud, eh?"

"That would depend on the mud, I guess."

Zackett sighed again.

"You've got a dog-goned good idea, Pete," he acknowledged. "It'll work. And it's legal. I couldn't find the way to handle this, but you have. And I'll be proud to help you out, as much as I can, even if I do cut my own throat in doing it."

Pete stared, puzzled, and Zackett grinned a little.

"You see, Pete — well, to confess all, I fell for Hazel Dexter, quite a spell ago. Fell hard. And she seemed to like me pretty well—till you came along."

Despite himself, Pete felt himself coloring a little.

"I saw her this afternoon," Zackett went on. "She didn't say much, Pete, but she didn't need to. Well, I've always had sort of a motto, to the effect that the best man deserves to win, and where she's concerned, I certainly wouldn't wish her anything less. She's of two minds about you, Pete, the same as a lot of other people are, but down under, I reckon she knows just how she feels. The

way you picked her off of that dam ahead of a bullet—I gathered that you made her plenty mad, barging in that way, but when she saw what it was all about, and had a night of worrying herself sick about what had happened to you, and figuring it was all her fault—you certainly got her to thinking about you."

"I wasn't trying to," Pete protested.

"Well, you do have a way of getting results. And when you put this scheme over—well, it'll just about be curtains for me. So by rights I'd ought to tell you that the whole idea is crazy, and tip off Cold Deck to slip about six ounces of lead between your ribs. But being a mercenary soul, I encourage my client and help him all I can."

He grinned suddenly.

"I'm for you till hell freezes over, Pete—which, from present indications, won't be soon. Of course, you being a Prentiss, this might be just another scheme to enslave the valley—but you could work the one that G. G. planned a lot easier and at a bigger profit. I'll get to work on it, right away. And, Pete—watch your step!"

Pete stood up. For a moment he gripped Zackett's hand, hard, while something in his throat made it difficult to speak.

"You do the same, Zane," he advised. "You won't be makin' yourself any too popular in certain quarters, either."

CHAPTER XVIII

Wearer of a Tin Star

DARKNESS had fallen as Pete went out to the street. He hesitated a moment, conscious of a keen appetite, and thinking of supper, but a feeling of sudden danger halted him. This section of town was illy lighted, and almost deserted at this hour. He had seen nothing, nor heard anything, but he had felt that same sense of peril more than once in the past, like a vagrant breeze stirring in a calm, and generally his hunch was good.

And now he remembered that Cold Deck had turned back when he'd started for town. He was playing a dangerous game now, a game with an adversary utterly cold-blooded and unscrupulous. Following his hunch, Pete swung silently about and faded into the alley, instead of going down the street. He'd just come out on the next street over, and if anybody was waiting for him along here—

His first hunch had been good. His second, he realized suddenly, had been bad. Something whizzed in the darkness of the alley, narrowly missing him, but carrying his hat off his head. Another rock was close behind the first, and this grazed his right temple, in a glancing blow which yet had enough sting to break the skin and send blood coursing down his face.

The rasping shock of it, the sudden biting pain and taste of blood in his mouth stung Pete to anger. He could see a dim figure farther down the alley; the faint light rippled on steel as a gun was drawn. Pete jerked his own gun and fired, saw the shadowy figure turn and run, and plunged in pursuit. Something like an echo to his own gun seemed to trouble the night; then there was only the pound of retreating footsteps ahead.

He was gaining, when a clutching something whipped his feet from under him, sending him sprawling headlong. Pete got grimly to his feet, wary now, still clutching his gun. What sort of a game was this, anyway? A rope had been stretched across the alley and it had upset him neatly and heavily. But there was something mighty funny about this whole thing, when a rope had been prepared in advance.

He went on, more cautiously now, keenly aware that whomever he had been chasing had had plenty of time to get away. Though someone might lurk at the corner—

Someone did. Two or three of them, in fact, men who jumped and grabbed as he came. Pete was about to pull trigger again and give them a real fight of it, when he caught the outline of a sheriff's star and checked the pressure. An instant later he

had been disarmed, his hands twisted behind his back.

"Got yuh," a voice panted. "Get his gun."

"What the blazes is this, anyway?" Pete demanded angrily. He stared at the short, stocky figure of the sheriff, and his eyes blazed. "Do you make a habit of going around jumping people that way? If you do, it's a mighty reckless proceeding. I took you for a bunch of thugs, and I came within an ace of drilling you, 'fore I saw yore star."

"We heard shootin', and somebody comin' down the alley, so we aimed to nab him," the sheriff growled. "And looks to me like we did."

"So that's it?" Pete swore. "I reckon your intentions were good, sheriff, but you're too slow. Somebody jumped me, and tried to drill me. I took a shot at whoever it was and chased him down the alley. You come along in time to grab me, and let him get away."

"Yeah?" The sheriff's voice held a sardonic note of incredulity. "You're the only hombre that come poppin' out of that alley like a gopher out of its hole. And who the devil are yuh, anyway?"

"Prentiss. Pete Prentiss. You're Sheriff Fletcher, I reckon."

"That's plumb correct. So yuh're Prentiss, eh?" The sheriff's voice was certainly not more friendly than it had been, and something clicked again in Pete's mind—like the unpleasant closing of a gate.

The law, he had been informed, was owned by the Box 8, but that didn't necessarily mean that Sheriff Fletcher would be inclined to look out for his interests. It probably meant just the contrary. For Cold Deck was the man who had long directed the policy of the Box 8, and whatever Cold Deck ordered, his henchmen here in town would do.

AND the way that attack had been laid, there in the alley, the all too pat arrival of the sheriff and a couple of deputies to grab him as he emerged—it fit together ominously. Fletcher's next words confirmed it.

"Lefty, you take this hombre and lock him up," he instructed. "If he's the man he says he is, that's about all we need tuh know. There seems to be somethin' funny here, and Bill and me'll just do a little investigatin'."

Completely disregarding Pete's protests, the two of them set off up the alley. Lefty, who was a hulking ape of a man who might have been first cousin to a gorilla, grinned unpleasantly and prodded Pete along with the muzzle of his own gun. With his hands tied behind his back, there wasn't much that Pete could do about it.

This was a frame-up, he could see that now. And Cold Deck was unquestionably back of it. But just what did he have in mind? It was a wonder that they hadn't used a hail of lead, there in the alley, but Pete was beginning to understand that Cold Deck worked in nefarious ways to accomplish his ends, and the unfolding of this scheme wasn't likely to be as sweet-smelling as that of a rosebud, or even a skunk cabbage.

The jail was only a couple of blocks away, and Pete had a chance to inspect it from close quarters. Very close quarters, he reflected grimly, as the door of a cell clanged shut behind him. He had had a hunch that trouble impended, back there, and that hunch had been right. But they had caught him napping, just the same.

That thrown stone which had knocked off his hat, the other which had bloodied his face — those had been deliberate, to get him to chase whoever had done it. Well, their scheme had worked, all right. The big deputy stared at him from under the light of a lantern.

"Look like yuh'd been in a fight," he commented.

"Somebody hit me with a stone."

"Yeah?" As Zackett had said, a lot of expression could be crowded into that one word, and there was plenty, all disparaging, in the way it was uttered now. Lefty started to turn away, but Pete stopped him.

"This is a pretty high-handed proceeding," he said. "I'm owner of

Box 8, and I can make you sweat for this. And, believe me, I will."

"Me, I'm just a deputy," Lefty grunted. "The sheriff takes the responsibility. Yuh can argue with him when he comes back, 's all I know."

"Well, how about some supper, while I'm waiting? I was just starting out to get some."

"Ain't that too bad, now, that yuh was interrupted?" Lefty clomped off down the corridor, leaving him alone. Pete fumed. The other cells all seemed to be vacant. Evidently he was the only prisoner in the jail that night. That, of course, might be accidental, but at the thought of what it might likewise portend, Pete felt a sudden cold chill along the back of his scalp.

A quarter of an hour passed before the sound of voices in the sheriff's office, at the end of the corridor off the cell blocks, apprised him that the sheriff had returned. A lantern came down the hallway again, casting giant and grotesque shadows as Fletcher carried it. He halted outside the cell and swung the light so it shone in.

"All fixed up snug an' nice, ain't yuh?" he grunted. "I just wanted to make sure of that."

"How about letting me out?" Pete rasped. "You're biting off a lot of trouble for yourself, Fletcher. You haven't any excuse for holding me at all."

"No?" Fletcher seemed mildly amused. He fumbled in a pocket and brought out half a plug of tobacco, to which a few hairs and the end of a burned match adhered. Brushing these off on his pant's leg, he bit off a copious chew with a snap of powerful teeth and returned the rest to his pocket.

"Reckon we'll keep on holdin' yuh here, just the same," he grunted. "I've been hearin' a lot about yuh, ever since yuh first hit this country, Prentiss. And most of it bad. Reckon it fits."

"You can find out that you're making a mistake, after it's too late," Pete warned. "But if you're going to insist on keeping me locked up, I have a right to see my lawyer, anyway. And I want to do it. Go find Zane Zackett and bring him here."

Fletcher's stumpy, full-fleshed figure seemed to expand a little. He stared a moment, eyes hardening, and spat in eloquent disgust.

"That sort of a act ain't going to do yuh a damn bit o' good," he growled. "I've heard of folks bein' lower'n a snake's belly, but I never quite knew how they could be—up tuh now. After seein' yuh, I know."

"What the blazes do you mean?" That cold feeling was back again, as though an arctic breath had blown through the cheerless cells.

"Don't know what I'm talkin' about, do yuh?" the sheriff taunted. "Still puttin' on an act for me." His voice was suddenly bleak and expressionless.

"As a prisoner, I reckon you've the right to know the charge we're holdin' yuh on," he said. "It's murder. We found Zackett there in his office, sprawled in a pool of his own blood, where yuh'd shot him. And one shot fired from yore gun, with yuh tryin' tuh make a getaway. And yore hat there in the office, where yuh'd lost it in yore hurry to get away. I'm holdin' yuh right here—and I reckon yuh'll swing for that killin'."

CHAPTER XIX

Murder by Mob

MURDER! Zane Zackett dead! Pete stared, shocked and incredulous, as Fletcher, having delivered the news, turned and clomped back down the corridor again. Now the situation was becoming appallingly clear to him.

Cold Deck hadn't known what sort of a scheme he had in mind, but he had been pretty certain that Pete did have one when he had set out for town. So Cold Deck, of course, had tagged along. And when Pete had been closeted with Zane Zackett for so long, Cold Deck's suspicions had become a certainty. Pete had something up his sleeve.

And Cold Deck was afraid of that

combination of Pete and the lawyer. Had Zackett been a man of the stripe of H. L. Henders, it wouldn't have worried Cold Deck for a moment. Henders had his price. But Zackett was a man who could neither be bought nor bluffed, so Cold Deck had laid his plan to dispose of both of them at one stroke. Pete had thought, there in the alley, that he had heard an echo to his own shot. Instead, it had been a bullet fired at close range into Zackett, there in his office.

Murder. And Pete with one shot fired from his gun; his hat, which had been deliberately knocked from his head, planted there in the office for the sheriff to find. And the testimony of the sheriff and his deputies that Pete had been trying to escape when they grabbed him, disputing his own story that he had been chasing an assailant, who according to their same testimony, was non-existent.

It was a clever scheme. For Zackett, despite the fact that he was a lawyer, and without any practice, was still well liked in town, and everyone hated the name of Prentiss. There might be one or two loopholes in the story, but they would likely find a way to plug them.

Half an hour later, Lefty brought his supper, as he had requested, and a bit of news with it. Pete launched into a barrage of questions.

"Doesn't it look mighty queer that I'd shoot my own lawyer?" he demanded.

Lefty snorted.

"Mike McNab says that Zackett was his lawyer, with a case ag'in the Box 8 and you," he retorted. "He says Zackett had promised tuh call yuh in tuh discuss settlin' it, which he done, and that when yuh couldn't bluff him into droppin' it, yuh shot him."

So that was the story, to furnish a motive for this killing. Pete sat, staring after the deputy, while his supper grew cold and the other questions plopped back into the recesses of his mind with a dull thud. A wry grin twisted his mouth for an instant. Whatever else he was, Cold Deck was thorough. You had to give him credit for that. He had foreseen that weakness, that a man wasn't apt to go out and shoot his own lawyer. This McNab, whoever he was—probably some saloon hanger-on — was willing to swear to the story he had told. It nullified Pete's story.

He ate the supper, but without tasting the food, then sat there to wait. There was nothing else that he could do. The jail had been well built, and to try to escape was hopeless. He could send for Henders, of course, who was supposed to be his attorney there in Barlock, but he shrugged that idea aside. Henders would pretend to do everything that he could for him, but he'd really be working to tighten the noose about his neck at every turn. And with Zane Zackett dead, he had no friend in Barlock—no friend in all of Poison Valley now, with the possible exception of Soong Lin.

THE murder of Zane Zackett was depressing in more ways than one. Pete had formed a genuine liking for the lawyer. And it only went to show the ruthlessness of the man who opposed him that an innocent third party should be so brutally dragged in to further a scheme.

Soong had warned him to watch his step. He had told Zane Zackett to do the same thing. But they were up against a man who was exactly what his nickname implied: one who planted a cold deck, carefully stacked, against his opponents—and a man who seldom missed a trick.

Pete started to his feet. The window behind the bars of his cell was open, to give scant ventilation to the stuffy, airless place, and through it now came a dull, far-off surge of sound which was like the breath of a blizzard sweeping down across a thousand miles of shivering prairie, or the ominous growl in the throat of Old Slewfoot. A sound which, once heard, could never be mistaken —the rising mutter of a mob.

Twice before in his experience Pete had heard that sound. A few

nights before he had been in the hands of men who aimed to lynch him, but they hadn't been a mob. They had been coldly determined, but with them it had been the idea of doing a job which they considered had to be done, to rid the country of a menace which would choke the life out of all the rest of them unless they did that duty, however unpleasant it might be.

A mob was a different sort of a proposition. When passions became inflamed, there could be no reasoning with them, no stopping them. Pete hadn't been directly concerned with those mobs which he had heard in the past, but it still made him shiver to recall how ruthless they had been. This mob had the same unmistakable sound—the growl of a hydra-headed beast which is licking its chops for blood.

And the sheriff wouldn't refuse to turn Pete over to them. He'd make a bluff at doing his duty, but it would be only a bluff, which the crowd would understand. Pete shivered again. He'd been in plenty of tight places before, but usually there had been a chance to fight back. Having a cold deck stacked against you was a different proposition.

Cold Deck wasn't aiming to take any chances. At a fair court trial, with plenty of money to spend and good lawyers like Blake and Blake, Pete might be able to show up a lot of things which Cold Deck didn't want aired, and blast the case sky-high. Cold Deck didn't aim to take any chances.

There had been a period of lull. Now the noise came again, as the growing mob surged out of one saloon and swept across the street to another. They were being fed plenty of raw liquor to stir them up. It wouldn't be long, now.

Someone was coming down the corridor—someone who panted a little, as from a hard run, who came uncertainly, but without a light. Pete stiffened. Then he was amazed to hear the low voice of Hazel Drexel.

"Pete—Mr. Prentiss? Where are you?"

"Right here." Pete's voice was low, too. The last time he had seen this girl was when he had held her in his arms as the dam was breaking under the impact of the dynamite. That, too, had been a moment of dire peril. He had saved her life then, by flinging her bodily at the bank, barely ahead of the avalanche of waters. And now—what was she doing here?

She was beside the barred door, her face showing white and strained in the gloom; and looking close, Pete could see that it was also stained with tears. But she had a ring of keys, and was fumbling desperately at the lock.

"Hazel! What are you doing here?" Pete gasped.

"I'm saving your life," she flashed back at him, and her voice, now, was low and bitter. "That mob's getting ready to come down here and kill you—and Sheriff Fletcher wouldn't do a thing to help you. I slipped into the office and found the keys—everyone is outside now—"

"But why should you do this for me—if you think I killed Zane—or don't—"

"I'm doing it because you saved my life for me," Hazel panted, and the key turned in the lock. Suddenly, closer now, came the sound of the mob again—drunken shouts, but with that deadly undercurrent of bloody menace. Pete felt the girl shrink back a little as she swung the door open.

"Hurry," she panted. "I pay my debts! Hurry, or it'll be too late."

It was a time to hurry, Pete knew that. But he couldn't go this way, not without knowing one thing.

"Hazel, are you doing this—still believing that I killed Zane?" he asked.

"You didn't kill him—yet," she gasped. "He's still alive—though Old Doc Tutt says he'll likely never recover consciousness. I hate you, and we're even now! And I hope the mob still gets you! And if they don't, and Zane dies, I'll kill you myself!"

CHAPTER XX

Beef Yells Twice

PETE'S impulse was to stop, scratch his head, and to argue. There was so much about the whole thing, and about this girl herself, that he just couldn't figure out. Even while she was looking at him that way, with little sparks thrusting out like lightning playing around a storm cloud, he couldn't quite believe that she meant all she said. If she did, why go to all this trouble on his account?

But it was no time for argument. That ominous, hydra-headed monster was coming down the street now on centipede legs, and the roar from its myriad throats might almost have been the bellow of some prehistoric monster. It wouldn't do to be caught now, with escape so close at hand. Even more to the point, he couldn't imperil Hazel by a delay which would bring discovery upon her.

The barred iron gate which separated the jail proper from the sheriff's office stood open, as Hazel had left it upon entering. The only way out was through that office, with the mob surging toward the outer door of it. They ran silently down the corridor, and had reached the gate when the outer door to the office swung soundlessly open, then closed again, and Sheriff Fletcher stood there.

He was in an attitude of waiting, and a little triumphant smirk played about the corners of his heavy mouth. He aimed to be there, as a sheriff should, to challenge the mob when it appeared. But it was only too plain that he was gloating over their coming and the thing they intended to accomplish.

But, man of straw though he might be in this grim drama of life and death, his sudden arrival constituted a new menace. He was directly in Prentiss's way of escape. Pete hesitated, but only for an instant. Then he had snatched the ring of keys from Hazel's hand and was gesturing toward a window at the side of the office. The next instant he was across the room at a gliding speed, and in a silence to equal the sheriff's own.

Fletcher turned, probably warned by some feeling of peril, and his eyes dilated as he stared up into the grim-smiling, merciless face now so close to his own. Pete swung the heavy keys in a circle at the end of two fingers.

"Mighty careless trick to leave keys in the door, Sheriff," he chided. "Mighty careless."

There had to be some explanation of how he had got hold of those keys, how he had opened the doors. Fletcher wouldn't believe, in retrospect, that he had been so careless, and his deputy would vehemently deny any culpability on his part. But the fact that Pete had the keys would leave them disturbed and doubtful.

For an instant, reddish jowls going suddenly pale, the sheriff stared back. Then he made a wild grab for his holstered gun. Pete looped the keys out a little farther, in a spinning arc, and they hit the sheriff on the side of the head with all the impact of a blackjack. He wilted like a frosted flower, slipping to the floor in an ungainly heap. Pete had Fletcher's gun in his own hand before the sheriff hit the floor.

IT HAD taken only a few seconds, and there had been no noise to be heard above the growing roar of the mob. They were very close now, barring any possible chance of escape through the door. Pete waited only long enough to slide the heavy bar in place across the door. That door had been well built, and would cause some delay. Hazel, he saw, had acted on his imperative gesture, and had slipped through the window at the side of the room.

That window opened on an alley, and Pete, flinging a leg over the sill, dropped softly. If any of the mob had thought to watch the windows, it would have been an unhealthy place to light, but since they had no suspicion as yet that anything was wrong, no watch had been set.

Someone was there, however—

Hazel. Her eyes were bright in the gloom as she turned to him.

"I've got to thank you for that," she whispered. "You—you're a gentleman, Pete—whatever else you are."

"I have my good points, same as a porcupine, once you get to know me," Pete conceded with a fleeting grin. "But right now I'm bad company as a cornered coyote, and this is a plumb unhealthy country to linger in."

She nodded understandingly, but still she did not go. Pete could hear the mob now, not twenty feet away from them, though there was a high board fence in between, which hid them. A petulant growl arose as they discovered the door to be barred, and assumed that this was another mere aggravating gesture on the part of the sheriff; then there rose a clamor for him to open up.

"I'm wondering if maybe we haven't misjudged you," the girl said. "Did you shoot Zane, Pete?"

"What do you thing?"

A louder, more angry clamor startled them. The mob was getting impatient. It would be only a matter of seconds until they would begin to suspect that something had an unhealthy odor. Hazel turned swiftly to Pete.

"I—I don't believe you did," she whispered, and there was a strange urgency in her voice which set his blood coursing. "Take care of yourself, Pete."

He stood there until she had been swallowed by the shadows which seemed to gather in a monstrous cluster at the rear of the jail, and there was a warm feeling about his heart which had not been there before. He was a man almost universally hated in a mighty hostile country, and sought by a mob that was anxious to lynch him. For all that, he felt almost gay and carefree in that moment.

They had the door open by now. The ease with which it had been done led Pete to suspect that one of the deputies had been in the mob, and, suspicious that something wasn't right, had come forward with a key which had slipped back the bolt. But as the crowd surged inward, there arose a new roar, a savage, ominous note of rage and frustration.

The hunt would be on now, with the same vigor that Slewfoot used in pursuing his prey. The best thing for him to do, Pete reflected, would be to get out of town, a long way out, while the getting was good. Or would it? He pondered, rubbing his chin. That was what they would figure on him doing, and the search would quickly fan out, spreading fast.

"Reckon maybe I can help them enjoy themselves without too much exertion on my part," Pete decided, and, circling, came back to the street. The mob was still milling around, buzzing like a kicked ant hill, in front of the jail. Some of them were starting to move, however. Horses, tied here and there to trees, hitch rails and posts, were destined to be scooped up in the sweep, adding more legs to the monster.

THERE was a saddled horse standing under a big cottonwood not far off. The tree was a massive thing, its trunk thicker through than the shoulders of a man, with heavy foliage spreading out like a lop-sided mushroom. He could barely see the outline of a horse standing there. It might have been made to order for his present need.

Reaching the tree, Pete untied the horse and turned to the saddle. It was not his plan to ride this cayuse and try for a getaway. As soon as a horse moved out now, with the mob just starting to break, it would become the object of instant suspicion. But if the reins were tied to the saddle-horn, and the horse sent plunging away in the gloom with a sharp slap or so, then they would chase it, and he hoped they'd get a lot of fun out of the proceeding.

A gun muzzle, thrusting at him across the back of the cayuse, unpleasantly like the head of a striking rattler, was Pete's first intimation that his schedule wasn't going to work out right. Behind the gun was a face which he recognized as belong-

ing to one of the Box 8 punchers, a man commonly known as Beef. It was an apt name, for he was not only big and beefy, but his fleshy face was the color of raw beef.

That he had recognized Pete in turn and was working, not for Pete but for Cold Deck, was as swiftly apparent. The triumph which was spreading across his rubicund countenance was wiped away as Pete reversed his own tactics. Fooling around the legs of a strange bronc was apt to be an unhealthy pastime, but under the circumstances it had points to commend it. Pete ducked down, dove between the legs of the cayuse, and swept Beef off his feet and down in a savage attack.

Luck, for the moment, was with him. The gun which Beef had been shoving at his face a moment before could just as easily have gone off as not, which would have brought a whole horde of the mob to investigate. But it didn't blast. Not only that, Pete saw it describe as pretty an arc as he had ever beheld, though he didn't have much time to watch it, and fall a dozen feet away. Which, with his own gun in his holster, evened things considerably.

As he had suspected, however, he had a real battle on his hands. Beef had gone down hard in the surprise of Pete's attack, and a jar like that would have knocked the wind and most of the fight out of the average hombre. Wih Beef it had served, apparently, only to liven him up.

He promptly brought a fist pumping up to connect with Pete's chin, demonstrating that he had very bony knuckles, and flung his other arm in a gesture which wasn't as affectionate as it looked, trying to get it around Pete's neck. At the same moment he opened his mouth to yell.

Pete grabbed a pair of particularly handsome ears, if size was a fair standard for judgment, using that leverage, raised Beef's head up and thumped it back down on the ground, hard. His purpose was served, for the moment, and no yell resulted. His own fist slammed hard against a toothy mouth, checking a fresh attempt to yell; then he clamped his fingers around Beef's throat and held on grimly.

By that time, judging by the sounds, most of the mob had dispersed and were taking up the hunt elsewhere. Which left it pretty much between Beef and himself, for the moment at least.

Beef slugged desperately for a few moments, then, using both hands, sought desperately to tear away the fingers which were throttling him. Failing in that, he brought up a knee which heaved Pete partly off, and tore loose.

FOR a moment, equally winded and battered, they crouched, watching each other. Beef made a gurgling noise in his throat, touching his blotched neck with tentative fingers.

"You're harder to kill than a cat that's twins," he growled. "I've tried it three times, and still yuh come up for more!"

"You threw that rock tonight?" Pete asked interestedly.

"Yeah. Likewise I shot yore horse out in the hills the other day, which should have been plenty. I won't make the mistake of stoppin' this time till yuh are plenty dead."

"And you rode in with Cold Deck this afternoon!" Pete nodded. He was getting some things straight now. Beef, then, was Cold Deck's chief lieutenant and trusted killer.

"Did you think you could come into this country and get away with a ranch like the Box 8?" Beef demanded in some wonderment. "That sort o' simple-mindedness is going to give yuh a piece of ground six feet by three, permanent. Yuh had plenty warning that it was unhealthy to linger—"

Somewhere, not far off, some of the frantic searchers had swerved and doubled back on themselves. Beef suddenly started to open his mouth wider to yell again, then checked the noise into a gasping grunt as Pete's gun appeared in his hand, the muzzle not a foot from Beef's nose.

But he had made enough noise to

be heard, and men were starting to investigate. Pete smiled thinly.

"Talkin' of Boot Hill, feller," he said softly, "they'll be plantin' you there in the mornin', 'less you answer so they lope on past!"

Not quite certain of where the sound had come from, a couple of the searchers had stopped at some distance and shouted. If unanswered, they would come on to investigate by the tree. Beef stared for an instant at the black circle of death so near his face, lifted his fascinated gaze to the unblinking, coldly smiling eyes which were watching him, and gulped.

"Who the blazes yelled?" came the petulant demand again.

"I did," Beef gurgled. "Me, Beef."

"Well, what the blazes for?"

They were starting to approach, and the gun muzzle slid ahead until it was almost touching the end of his nose. Beef shrank as he read the warning in it, and his voice was steady with an effort.

"I thought I saw him duck down that alley," he shouted. "Get him, for Pete's sake!"

"Pete's sake," was a little confused in Beef's mind. Pete judged with sardonic amusement, but he appreciated the sentiment as the others turned and plunged off on the new lead. Beef's face was beaded with sweat and he was breathing as though he had run a long way.

Then, suddenly, as Pete's attention wavered for just an instant, Beef risked everything on a swift attack. He had half drawn his legs back, and now he lashed out suddenly with both feet, catching Pete in the stomach, hurling him back for a dozen feet, to land on his back, gasping and helpless, the wind knocked out of him. And Beef was up now, yelling loudly for help.

CHAPTER XXI

Old Doc Tutt

AGONY tore at Pete as he tried desperately to suck breath again into tortured lungs. Doubled up and gasping, he lay there, down and all but out—but not quite. His mind was still as alert as ever, and he heard Beef's yells for help, heard the answering yells of half a dozen men from different points as they turned to respond. He saw Beef make a dive for his dropped gun and come up with it in his hand. Then, his courage suddenly restored by the contact of the cold steel, Beef was a killer again.

Snarling vindictively, he turned and rushed at Pete, firing as he came at the helpless man on the ground—helpless insofar as getting to his feet or running were concerned, for the moment. A little wind was coming back to him now, painfully, but his leg muscles were still cramped and unable to respond to his will. But Beef, in the gloom, and blood-mad with the lust to kill, had overlooked one thing.

When he had fallen, Pete's fingers had still held onto his own gun in an instinctive, almost unbreakable grip.

Now, impelled by the strongest of age-old instincts, that of self-preservation, moved by a dominating will, he managed to raise his arm, to fire in return. Beef's first bullet had thudded into the ground an inch from his ear. The second missed by a yard, as Beef walked straight into his line of fire and went down like a pole-axed steer.

The others were coming up, very close now, yelling hoarse encouragement. But it was dark there, under the spreading branches of the big cottonwood. The horse, whose reins Pete had untied, had long since left that vicinity to these two-legged creatures who seemed so anxious for trouble tonight.

Somehow Pete half rolled to his feet, got up and staggered across to the trunk of the tree. His legs were still unsteady, threatening to buckle under him, and he couldn't possibly run now, not for some minutes yet. But as several men ran up, stopping suddenly at sight of the sprawled, bloody figure of Beef, lying there with arms wide-flung, Pete sidled around the trunk of the tree to the deeper blackness on the far side.

He felt a little sick as he, too, viewed what had been a fighting man just seconds before, but was now no longer to be feared. The sickness was not all from the treacherous kick which Beef had given him. Though he'd been gun-handy for a long time, Pete had never killed a man before, and he didn't relish the experience now, even though Beef had been trying to murder him at the time, and he had shot solely in self-defense. The sight of what Beef was, compared to what he had been, was rather unnerving.

But there had been no chance to take his time and shoot to disarm, as he had done with Van Sice and other men. Nor had his half palsied arm held the speed and sureness necessary for such careful shooting.

The others were exclaiming angrily at sight of Beef, but there was a little awe and uneasiness in their demeanor as they glanced hastily, fearfully around at the darkness. One of them voiced the common thought.

"This Prentiss is plumb bad medicine," he said soberly. "Look what he did to Van Sic—and then he killed that lawyer tonight. And now he's got Beef!"

"And from the way Beef sounded, he seemed to figger he had things all his own way," another man added. "We got to get him—but don't take no chances. Anybody that sees him better gun him first and ask questions afterward."

THAT was cheerful advice to listen to, for Pete realized that most of them would do just that, if given the chance. But the fact that he was within ten feet of Beef, and that he could almost have reached out and touched them as they stood to discuss the matter, gave him safety for the moment. It didn't even occur to them that he had not been able to run and would be so close at hand now.

They picked Beef up and carried him off, spreading the word of what had happened. Attracted by the shooting and yelling, men were heading back for this section of town again. Any hope Pete had entertained that they would scatter widely and out of town was gone now. The hunt would be more relentless than ever, and probably guards would be posted by now to watch the railroad and every road or exit leading out of town. There was enough light so that they could see any moving figure for quite a way, and challenge. If they didn't like the answer, a bullet would be the next thing.

Something caught his eye, and Pete stooped and picked it up. Beef's hat, which had fallen off during their struggle, and had been unnoticed by the others. It fitted pretty well. And they would be looking for a man without a hat!

Pete sauntered out, almost casually, from behind the tree, moved boldly on to the street and down it. So long as he kept out of direct light from windows or open doors, they'd have a hard time recognizing him. He passed two or three men who were moving intently along, and by adopting the same sort of an attitude, as though he too were one of the posse, got by without being given a second glance. They were looking for a hunted man, and he didn't look the part.

For the moment, at least, they were confused, uncertain as to where he could have gone. Now would be a good time to get out of town. They were organizing several small posses to ride in various directions, and he could move along with some of them without much trouble. Once outside of town, it wouldn't be too hard to get away.

Tempted for a moment, Pete decided against it. The night was still young, and he had an impelling desire to find out how Zane Zackett was getting along before he left town. Though only a pawn in the game, Zane had been shot because of Pete, and he felt a strong responsibility for him, as well as a personal liking.

A look at the law office showed it to be dark. Pete judged that Zackett would have been removed to his own room, wherever that might be, or to some sort of a hospital—if he was

still alive. And if he was alive, someone would be looking after him, so that was a good place to stay away from. But he had to find out from someone who knew. Which would most likely be old Doc Tutt.

Tutt was the only medico in that section of country, a bluff, rough and ready sort of a practitioner who had spent the best years of his life on the frontier and who possessed, if not a great deal of learning from medical school, at least a lot of experience and what a few men either acquire or have instinctively—the healing touch. Doc Tutt would be able to tell him.

Boldly Pete approached a man moving the other way along the dark street.

"Where'll I find the doc now?" he asked.

The other man paused.

"Hard to say," he said. "He's been with Zackett, I guess. Might be in his office now—might not. That's upstairs over the Golden Nugget Saloon. Take the outside stairs."

"Thanks," Pete nodded, and presently discovered the Golden Nugget. It was the biggest and busiest saloon in Barlock, and at the present moment seemed to be doing a good business, despite the fact that many potential customers were out on posse duty. An excellent place for a doctor's office, up above it. Right handy to where a lot of business would be created.

Smiling a little grimly at thought of the milling crowd just below him, men who were excitedly wondering where he could be found, Pete climbed the rough outside stairway, pushed open a door, and was in Doc Tutt's waiting room. A coal oil lamp, the wick turned low, burned on a table, there was a cluttered desk on the opposite side of the room, and three or four chairs on a faded rug, but no sign of Tutt himself.

There was a copy of *Everybody's,* another of *McClure's,* and an old newspaper from a distant city. Pete started to turn up the lamp, thought better of it, and busied himself with inspecting his revolver. He had returned it to his holster when there was the plodding sound of footsteps on the stairway outside. Nobody coming in a hurry for the doctor, so it would probably be the doctor himself.

It was Tutt, Pete saw as the door was pushed open. Doc Tutt, with a little tuft of white beard pushing irascibly out in front of him, looked tired. He entered, closing the door behind him, and nodded to his caller.

"Be with you in a minute," he said. "Got to wash up a little."

"No hurry," Pete said cheerfully.

"Turn up the light," Tutt advised. "You can see better."

He disappeared in the next room, and Pete waited until he returned, rubbing his hands vigorously on a towel, which he tossed impatiently on the back of a chair.

"Now then," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"You can tell me how Zane Zackett is," Pete replied.

For the first time, he saw Doc Tutt look sharply at him, his eyes narrowing. Pete withstood that steely stare for the space of a minute, aware that Tutt was missing no detail of the bruises and battering suffered from Beef's driving fists. Then Tutt nodded.

"You've got plenty of nerve," he said dryly, "coming here."

"Only place I could find out about Zane," Pete retorted. "How is he?"

"Right int'rested, ain't you—for a man that's supposed to have gunned him down?"

"What do you think?"

Tutt grunted.

"If I thought yuh'd done it," he said, "I'd take care of you myself. I like that boy—even if he is a lawyer."

"Thanks, Doc. And now—what are his chances?"

"If yuh're waitin' for his testimony that you didn't shoot him, to get you out of a bad mess, you'd better be gettin' out of town while it stays night. He's in pretty bad shape, unconscious. Be that way for days, I'm afraid—and it's three to one if he ever does come to again on this earth."

CHAPTER XXII

Cold Deck Death

THAT was bad. Pete had grown genuinely to like Zane Zackett in the few times that he had talked with him, and if the lawyer died now, as a result of working for him, he would feel like a murderer.

"I'm glad you don't think I did it, Doc," he said quietly.

"Me, I ain't a fool," Tutt growled. "I've seen plenty killers in my day, and you ain't one. What the devil you are, I don't know—except that, next to yore uncle, who was murdered because of it, you're the worst hated man I've ever known anything about. I wouldn't be at all partial to being in your boots now—not for all the Box 8."

"Seems like I have to wear them, though," Pete nodded, and let it go at that. "I want you to do everything you can for Zane, Doc. Don't worry about expenses. I'll pay them—if nothing happens."

Doc's grim nod testified that he knew what Pete meant.

"I'd do that, anyway," he said. "Don't worry. But there's not much I can do. That's the worst of it. He may come out of it of his own accord—may not. It's up to nature."

"There's one thing you can do. I can't do it myself, so I have to ask you. If Zane shows any signs of recovery, of getting so he can talk again—see to it that he doesn't stop another bullet, or something just as bad, to keep his tongue from wagging."

"You figger there'll be danger?"

"Plenty."

Tutt nodded again, his wisp of beard seeming to bristle.

"Nothing like that'll happen," he assured Pete. "I'll see to it."

"Thanks," Pete arose, hesitated, then held out his hand a little diffidently. "I'd sort of like to shake hands, Doc—if you don't mind, seeing who I am. It's heartening to find somebody who figures you might not wear horns, even if you do have hoofs."

The old Doc's face relaxed a little, and he gripped Pete's hand hard.

"I'm wishin' you luck, feller," he said. "And you'll need it. Watch yore step!"

Pete walked down the stairway feeling a little better. If anyone could save Zane Zackett, he had a strong hunch that Tutt would be the man to do it.

The last of the moon had vanished now behind the horizon, and the stars looked down, yellow and distant. Most of the lights had winked out around town, though men still rode here and there on the relentless hunt. Pete found three horses with drooping heads, blowing hard, standing before another saloon, farther up the street. Not quite what he preferred, but he couldn't be too choosy tonight. Pete helped himself to the best looking cayuse, swung into the saddle and rode away unchallenged.

He took the most direct road out of town, in the direction of the Box 8, correctly gauging that if any road was left unguarded now that would be the one; and again there was no one to challenge his going. A couple of miles out of town, he heard horsemen approaching from the opposite direction, and pulled off into the brush while they passed, then rode on again.

Nothing else occurred to interrupt him until, with dawn in the air, he came finally to the ranch he sought. He had learned the location of Slim Mowery's outfit, since that night when Slim had tossed him a rope and pulled him from the flooded river. He had to have help now, and Slim seemed a likely choice, from the few possibilities which were open to him.

SLIM MOWERY had a small outfit, nestling up against a corner of its big and grasping neighbor, the Box 8. For all of its smallness, Mowery had worked hard and managed well, and he had a fair start toward a good herd and a good ranch. He was a bachelor, asPete knew, but he had a couple of cowboys and a cook.

With such a set-up, it was entirely possible that Slim would sleep in the

bunk house with his men. Pete drew a breath of relief when his practiced eyes spotted the little bunk house, and, off at some distance, another log house which he deduced would be Mowery's own headquarters.

From halfway between them, at the cook house, there came a rattle of pots and pans and a thin streamer of smoke was curling out of the upjutting stove pipe. Which meant that the sleepy-eyed cook was starting breakfast, and in another quarter of an hour he would be bellowing for the cowboys to roll out and come and get it.

Leaving his horse back out of sight, Pete slipped around to the house and peered in at a window. It wasn't very light in there, but he saw what looked like a bed with someone in it, so he pounded on the window. A minute later Slim Mowery shoved it open and starred at him.

"Prentiss!" he exclaimed. "What's going on?"

"Plenty," Pete nodded. "But you saved my life for me once. Mowery, so I've come to ask you to do some more of the same. There's posses out huntin' for me, right anxious to lynch me."

Mowery frowned, and rubbed fingers across his stubbled jaw.

"Seems like that's kind of a habit where you're concerned," he commented.

"Seems as though," Pete agreed. "Do you give me a hand, or should I explain first?"

Slim Mowery stared a moment longer, then suddenly shoved the window higher.

"To hell with explaining," he said. "Get inside here, out of sight, while I get my boots on. Let's see, now," he added thoughtfully. "You say there's a posse huntin' yore scalp?"

"Several of 'em, I judge."

"In that case, you'll need to hide out somewhere a spell. . . . Let's see. I got it. There's a little cave, off on a corner of my land, and I don't believe anybody else knows of it. I suppose you'll want to eat. Wait a minute."

He was gone, to return presently with a half filled gunny sack slung over his shoulder. He ripped a blanket off the bed and thrust it at Pete.

"You'll want to sleep, too," he said. "Come on."

He led the way out through the window again, circling so that no one, even of his own hands, would see them. Pete indicated his horse.

"I'll look after it," Mowery promised. They dipped behind a screen of willows where a small creek flowed toward Silver River and followed it to a little shoulder of hill not half a mile from the house. Back from the creek was a dense growth of stunted pines, and on the hillside itself was a carpet of rose briars, thorn-apple and service-berry, vying with buckbrush for a foothold. Halfway up the slope, pushing aside some brush, Mowery disclosed an opening wide enough for a man to enter, but only by stooping.

Inside there was a room perhaps eight by ten, not tall enough to stand upright in, but well sheltered.

"I reckon you'll be all right here," Mowery said. "You can find all you want to eat in this sack, and I'll slip back after dark. Now, if you want to give me the low-down—"

"I'm supposed to have murdered Zane Zackett," Pete said.

"Supposed to have, eh?"

"He's still alive—or was when I left town. But unconscious. Doc Tutt says it's three to one against him ever getting conscious again."

"Who shot him?"

"I figure that Cold Deck attended to that detail, though it's just a guess."

"Cold Deck, eh? Your foreman?"

"That description is sort of inaccurate, everything considered."

"I never did like that hombre. Go on."

PETE gave him a full account, to which Mowery listened attentively. Then he whistled.

"You're in a tight fit, feller," he nodded. "But I'm for you. There wouldn't be any chance that I could lend a hand with your scheme, would there—whatever it is? I mean, now that Zackett ain't in no shape to

carry on? Course, I ain't no lawyer, like he is—"

"I reckon you'd be just the man I need, Slim. But you're doing plenty for me as it is. If you get mixed up in that—well, you know what happened to Zane, and what they're tryin' to do to me. You'd have Cold Deck and his whole crew on your trail."

"I thought I was a friend of yours," Mowery growled.

Pete nodded.

"If you put it that way, Slim, I'll be mighty glad to have you help. I sure need some assistance mighty bad. And so does all the rest of this valley, way I figure it."

"You said a mouthful there," Mowery conceded. "Now, if you'll give me the details—"

For the next half-hour Pete talked, as he had talked to Zane Zackett. Mowery listened attentively, and an enthusiastic grin spread across his face. At the conclusion, he gripped Pete's hand heartily.

"I sort of had a hunch before that you was a white man," he said. "Now I know it. And it's a great scheme—though it may take some talkin' to make folks believe you mean it. Me, I'll be busy today as a bob-tailed cow in fly time. See you tonight."

Pete watched him go, with rising hope, then had breakfast and rolled in the blanket. The day passed uneventfully. Once he saw riders come up to the ranch buildings, then swing away again, but no one came near the cave. It was an hour past darkfall, and the moon shone in a tranquil sky, when Slim arrived to report.

"I saw four men today," he said, and from the cave mouth waved his hand in an inclusive gesture. "All of them small ranchers that's tied up with the Box 8, whether they like it or not. And I done a lot of talkin'," he added with a reminiscent grin. "Didn't know I had it in me.

"They was as suspicious and hard to convince as a dog that's had his nose full of porcupine quills and finds a porky wantin' to be friends and play. But I guess I made 'em see the light. Tomorrow we'll really get things to rollin'."

He was outlined in the glow of the moon, there beside the cave mouth, when a gun blasted, sudden and loud on the night. Slim Mowery threw wide his hands and pitched, to roll for twenty feet down the slope, until he was stopped by a tangle of rose briars.

CHAPTER XXIII

Battle for Empire

THE blasting gun-flame lanced out like a sword from the darkness. Then, before Pete could move, Cold Deck Jones moved into the light, with a motion like that of a rattlesnake gliding forward, in his hand holding the still smoking forty-five, its black muzzle bent on Pete. Pete checked his own motion toward his hip. No speed on earth could match or beat a gun already drawn, in the hands of such a man as Cold Deck.

A hot, tearing rage surged through Pete, sending the blood drumming into his temples, blinding him to caution. The thing which he had just witnessed was as cowardly and contemptible a shooting as he had ever heard of, done from ambush and utterly without warning. A cold deck, played to the grim end.

"Careful," Cold Deck warned sharply. "I don't want to kill you, Prentiss—not just now, anyway. But lift them hands out of temptation's way and hold it. I ain't playin', not tonight."

He stepped forward and lifted Pete's gun, transferring it to his own pocket, made a swift search for any other weapons, and stepped back again. There was no stirring from that sprawled form part way down the slope.

"Like I said, I'm not quite ready to kill you—but I'd ought to," Cold Deck went on, and a little of the venom had crept now into his repressed voice. "I didn't hear all that you two was sayin', but I heard

plenty. Tryin' to double-cross me, both of yuh."

"You speak as a qualified expert, of course?" Pete suggested.

"I've done plenty of it in my time," Cold Deck conceded without rancor. "And I long ago learned that it don't pay to let the other fellow put anything over on you. You signed an agreement, when you came here, about the Box 8. And now you're tryin' to get around it."

"Anything that I'm doing is straight, honest, and doesn't infringe what I signed," Pete snapped. It was, he knew, useless to argue with this killer. But anything which would gain time and keep him alive might bring some possible opportunity to fight back, and he was watching for the breaks, ready to take advantage of any which might come.

"Mebby you've found a way to get around that, same as yuh did in buyin' those cattle," Cold Deck agreed. "I don't reckon it'll come to no test in court one way or the other." He spoke deliberately now in the cruder jargon of the country, to cover up all of that higher background upon which he had deliberately turned his back. "It don't make any diff'rence what yuh done, for it's gone just as far as it's going to, already. And you might as well make up yore mind to that."

"Meanin' you intend to murder me, too?"

Cold Deck shook his head.

"Nope," he denied. "You've got it comin' but I saved your life once because you're a Prentiss, and that being so, I can't very well gun you down now. I've worked for old G. G. too long to go and forget his wishes so soon."

"You saved my life once because some of your crew was watchin', and you didn't dare do no other way," Pete retorted. This might not be diplomatic, but he was in no mood to concede anything to this stalking beast of prey, who was as cruel and blood-thirsty as that catamount had been, as stark a menace as Old Slewfoot. "And I reckon you put plenty over on G. G."

Cold Deck's face did not change. But the pupils of his eyes seemed to dilate and narrow again.

"Mebby I wasn't bein' altruistic," he conceded. "But I'm being practical. And I'm aimin' to see that you live up to the agreement you signed. There's just one way to do it, and that's to have you sign a new one, turnin' the Box 8 over to me. And the sooner you do it, the better off you'll be."

So that was it. Light dawned on Pete now. Despite his bluff, Cold Deck was definitely uneasy. He didn't know quite what sort of a scheme Pete had in mind, nor its details.

The only way that he could be sure of getting the Box 8 now was to force Pete to sign it over to him. Until that was done, he preferred to keep Pete alive.

But, by the same token, Pete would be signing his own death warrant in signing any such transfer of property. He shrugged.

"Think I'm a fool?" he asked,

COLD DECK shook his head. His smile had a cruel twist to it.

"Nope," he conceded. "Yuh've got plenty of what it takes, brains or nerve. Which is just why I'm countin' on yuh to sign."

"You'll have to think again."

"Hombre, you figger you'll die if you sign that. Mebby you will—mebby not. I might find it more profitable to let you go, once I've got what I want."

He paused for a moment to let that sink in.

"Likewise," Cold Deck went on slowly, "if you're either to live or die, it'd be a lot more pleasant to live the way you are, and not all crippled up—or to die easy, since it adds up to the same result in the long run. Like I say, you've got plenty nerve—but I can make you sign 'fore I finish. Don't fool yoreself none about that." He gestured briefly toward the fallen man down the slope below them, by way of emphasis, but without taking his eyes off Pete.

"So now I'm going to tie yuh up, then write out that agreement. And

it'll be the part of wisdom to sign without no ruckus."

As he spoke he dipped into a pocket with one hand, still holding the gun with the other, and fished out a rawhide thong, and with a loop already built in it. He shook this open, sidled around behind Pete.

"Put your hands together behind your back," he ordered.

Pete tensed. The gun still menaced him, but he had one fighting chance now. His hands were still free, and Cold Deck didn't want to kill him—not yet. After he was tied, that chance would be gone.

The cowboy made up his mind, even as he started to bring his hands back. His right foot lifted and kicked back like that of a cow, with as little forewarning of what was to happen. He caught Cold Deck squarely on the ankle, then, ducking and twisting, was under the gun and at him, fighting like a wildcat.

The surprise of his attack helped, but it wasn't quite enough. Even in the sudden pain of that kick, Cold Deck was ready for trouble. He chopped down savagely with the heavy barrel of the gun, and Pete's desperate attempt to get his head out of the way was frustrated by Cold Deck's other hand, a bunched fist which smashed upward and grazed the point of his jaw. Caught between those closing pinchers, the gun barrel found its mark like a red-hot poker running across Pete's skull. Shooting flames which were swallowed in a thundering, darkness closed in on his head, where giant drums seemed to be beating. Pete pitched forward and lay still.

CHAPTER XXIV

G for Trouble

PETE'S head throbbed painfully as consciousness gradually returned, and there was the salty taste of blood in his mouth—his own blood, Pete discovered, still running in a little, slowly coagulating trickle from a cut in his scalp.

Not more than two or three minutes had passed, apparently, while he was unconscious. The moon still rode serenely overhead, though it seemed to dance and jerk as he looked up at it, to be crossed with blood-red flecks. His hands were tied now behind his back, the rawhide cutting cruelly into the flesh, and his legs, stretched in front of him, were in similar condition. He was seated on the path just in front of the cave, almost where he had fallen.

A few feet away, using a smooth, flat stone for a table, Cold Deck, with paper and pencil, weapons to which he had long been a stranger, was laboriously composing the agreement which he intended for Pete to sign. He straightened presently, sighing in relief, and read it over to himself. Satisfied, he turned back, facing Pete.

"Woke up, have yuh?" he asked. "Got it through yore head by this time that I mean business?"

"I never had much doubt of that," Pete agreed.

"That's somethin'. You mighty near caught me nappin', but not quite. And get this. You won't get another chance to do even that much. So it'll be a lot more sensible to sign and be done with it."

He held the paper up for Pete to see—it was written in a large, bold hand with indelible pencil. Then he proceeded to read it aloud. It was short, terse, but legally binding enough, so far as Pete could tell.

"If yuh're ready to sign, say so, and I'll loosen yore hands," Cold Deck suggested.

Pete shook his head.

"You're wastin' your time, Cold Deck. I'm not going to sign."

"No?" Cold Deck's face did not alter, and yet it was unpleasantly as though some great cat had licked its chops in pleased anticipation. "My horse ain't far away. I'll just go and get a runnin' iron, and have me a little fire in the cave here. It's been a long time since I done much work on calves with a runnin' iron, but yuh'll find I can be right artistic, with a whole night to work in."

Pete felt the cold sweat break out on his face. Cold Deck wasn't joking. He would resort to torture, no

doubt of that. Pete's roving eyes focused suddenly. Then, as quickly, he looked away again, so that Cold Deck, facing him and examining his bonds to be sure that they would stay put while he was gone, wouldn't see.

For, down below, Slim Mowery was stirring a little. Slim, who had lain there so still and bloody; whom he had assumed, as had Cold Deck, to be dead. If Cold Deck went after anything now, he'd see Slim.

"Let's talk it over," Pete suggested.

Cold Deck grinned unpleasantly.

"Don't like the notion of a runnin' iron, eh?" he asked. His back was toward Slim, down the hill. "But why not? I could do a plumb artistic job. I'd be willing to sort of tattoo yuh up, like some of these sailors has done to them. Start on yore chest, say, with a Box 8. Mebby I could burn a steer on yore right arm, and a horse on yore left. Then, if yuh still wanted to be made pretty, somethin' real nice, like a pretty girl, right across yore face. Sure yuh don't want me to get that iron?"

Slim Mowery was stirring a little more now. He tried to lift himself on one arm, then on the other, and raised himself a foot or more, only to fall back helplessly. To cover that rustling noise, Pete answered hotly:

"Do you think you can bluff me that way, Cold Deck? I'd be twice as sure not to sign at all, if you ever tried it."

"Think so? I'll just get it and we'll see, if yuh like."

"If that's as far as you can go in talking it over, go right ahead—and to the devil with you."

COLD DECK hesitated. Here was a man who appeared to be scared, which was not to be wondered at. But when it came to bluff, Pete could play as good a game as Cold Deck himself.

"I'm willing to be reasonable," Cold Deck suggested. "You sign, and get out of this country, and I give you my word you can go. That way you'll be as well off as when you came into it."

"How do I know you'll let me go?" Pete persisted. He was playing for time now. For Slim Mowery had tried again, like a man who was either very drunk or so utterly weary that he could hardly move. But he was alive, and this time he had dragged himself to his hands and knees, then crawled a yard or so before he had had to stop and rest.

If Cold Deck saw him now, Slim would have no chance at all. But if Pete could keep Cold Deck occupied until Slim could get off in the darkness he would at least have a chance. With returning strength, Slim might even be able to reach his own horse, or Cold Deck's, and get to the saddle. If he could get away, and reach his crew, he'd send back help. It was a slender chance, but Pete aimed to help Slim all he could.

"I don't know of anything I can tell yuh that'll do much good," Cold Deck suggested presently. "Yuh won't take my word—and I've nothing else to give."

That was grimly true. There were plenty of men of similar caliber to Cold Deck in this western country, men who would kill or steal as the occasion offered, but with many of them there was a difference. If they gave their word, other men would tak it, unquestioningly, because on that point they had found it a paying proposition to keep their honor unstained. Right now, Cold Deck was feeling the lack of any sort of honor in a ruthless career.

Pete pretended to hesitate, to consider this. Slim was stirring again, crawling a little more. To cover up his retreat, Pete had to keep talking.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll have to take your word, I suppose. And after all, there's no reason why you shouldn't let me go after you get what you want. There's nothing for me to stay in this country for if I don't have the Box 8, and if I get out, that'll suit you just as well."

That wasn't quite true. There was something in this country far more to be desired than the Box 8, so far as Pete was concerned, but Hazel wasn't for discussion with Cold

Deck. The latter was agreeing eagerly.

"That's it, sure," he nodded. He was already loosening the thong which bound Pete's wrists, but before he removed it he drew his gun again. "Don't go tryin' any tricks now," he warned. 'I'm gettin' pretty short on patience. And don't try tearin' that agreement up."

"Think I'm a fool?" asked Pete, working his arms to restore the circulation.

"Yuh ain't no fool, but yuh're plumb reckless sometimes," Cold Deck growled. "Sign it, now."

He handed across the flat stone, the paper and the pencil. Down below, Slim Mowery was making a little better progress now. He had been hard hit, but he was still alive, and he seemed to be gaining a little strength as the first shock wore off. Another minute or so and he would be out of sight.

That wouldn't do him much good, not in his present condition, if Cold Deck discovered that he was gone. But, quietly enough now, clouds were beginning to drift across the sky, threatening to blot away the moon. That extra measure of blackness would be a tremendous help to Slim.

Pete took the agreement and read it over, then as he saw Cold Deck growing impatient, picked up the pencil. If the killer got the idea that he was deliberately stalling for time, he might get suspicious and take a look around.

"How do you want me to sign this?" Pete asked.

"Why, with your name, of course. Pete Prentiss."

"Peter George Prentiss, you mean —same as my other legal papers?"

Cold Deck hesitated a moment, then nodded. That sounded logical. A signature here had to be the same as on any other legal papers he had executed for the Box 8, or it would be valueless in court. And George had been his uncle's name, so was likely to be his own middle name.

"Yeah, sign it."

PETE signed, slowly, carefully. He had a strong hunch that this paper wasn't ever going to play any more of a part in this drama than what it was playing right now, but if it ever did show up in court, it would cause Cold Deck a lot of trouble. For Pete had signed checks and other papers, in the last few days, as Peter Sylvester Prentiss, Sylvester having been his mother's maiden name. A signature of Peter George would not only be valueless, but would be sure to excite suspicion.

Cold Deck studied it, nodded, not quite satisfied since Pete had raised that last question, and slipped it into his pocket. He hesitated, and in his eyes Pete could see the sudden light of the killer. In that moment, with the paper signed, Cold Deck was strongly tempted to finish the job with a bullet.

His eyes roved like those of a puma crouching on a limb, waiting for an unsuspecting prey to come a little closer. Suddenly the pupils of Cold Deck's eyes dilated, and he stared, not quite understanding. Then he cursed as he saw that the place where Slim Mowery had been was empty now.

Jumping to his feet, he hesitated an instant, then grabbed the rawhide thong. Pete made no resistance. When he had been tied securely again, Cold Deck plunged away, but now the clouds had covered the moon.

Five minutes passed, ten. Pete could hear him plunging about in a frenzied search. Then Cold Deck returned, fury blazing from him.

"That ——— got away," he growled. 'And I just remembered—yore name wasn't George on that will. But I know how to handle your sort. You'll be mighty anxious to sign, and sign right, time I give yuh another chance."

CHAPTER XXV

Indian Trick

COLD DECK moved away again to return presently, leading his horse. Without ceremony

he picked Pete up, almost as effortlessly as if he had been a child, and slung him across the saddle, face down. With a lariat which had been tied to the saddle he roped Pete fast, the rope passing under his arms at the shoulders, under the horse and around his already trussed ankles.

It would be a grimly uncomfortable way to ride, jolting on his stomach with every step of the horse, completely helpless, and Cold Deck was devising this torture deliberately, of course. Without a word he took the reins and started off, leading the horse.

But at least they had helped at a critical time. Slim Mowery had reached his own horse and would probably be safely back to his own buildings again, where he could get the help he needed. Such help as he might send for Pete would arrive too late, but at least his escape had made a change in Cold Deck's plans, made him more wary of what he did.

It had also saved Pete from being callously killed once the paper was signed. There was some gain, at least.

For a couple of hours, leading the horse in silence, Cold Deck kept on. Unable to see anything but the ground below his face, and with small bushes whipping up to slap it every now and again, Pete had no idea as to where they were going, save that they were gradually climbing into the hills. Then the faint murmur of the waterfall came to him, and he knew that they were back on Box 8 land, miles from where they had been, not far from the big dam and lake behind it.

Finally the horse stopped, which was a relief. Unable to move at all, cruelly jolted, Pete was half sick and aching in every muscle. Cold Deck unfastened him and allowed him to slide to the ground in a heap, still with hands and feet tied.

"Feelin' good?" he asked. 'Well, it's just a sample of how you'll be feelin' 'fore I give yuh a chance to sign next time."

He clutched Pete by the collar, dragging him a few feet, until he was sitting upright, legs outstretched, back to a pine tree. With the lariat Cold Deck trussed him fast to this, then turned and swung into the saddle and rode away.

THE dizzying sickness was subsiding a little now as he could sit again on solid ground, and Pete looked around. The moon had sunk from sight, though the night was star-sprinkled and warm. Almost at his feet was a steep slope downward, down and down to the dark, placid waters of the reservoir, and in the distance he could just glimpse the edge of the big waterfall, hear its steady rumble where the river now poured over the concrete part of the dam, the lake level ten feet lower down than it had been when he had first climbed up there.

That day hadn't been very far back, but it seemed long ago. He had found Bob Dexter up here that day, surprised by the big catamount and in need of help—Bob, who had come here to kill him!

The catamount was dead, but there might be other prowling beasts of prey abroad in these hills—such savage killers as Old Slewfoot! Did Cold Deck aim to leave him tied up here, helpless, for some such animal to finish off?

That didn't seem quite likely, and now, not too far off, he heard one shot, followed again by silence. Pete waited, conscious of thirst, of the water so close at hand yet so very far away. The murmur of the waterfall was almost a torture.

He could do absolutely nothing with his bonds. The rawhide thong had cut into the flesh of his wrists, and they were swelling. Even if he could loosen it, the lariat rope would still keep him helpless.

More than an hour had passed before he heard Cold Deck returning. He was leading the horse again, with a fresh burden tied on behind the saddle, a burden at which the horse snorted restively. Cold Deck untied it and threw it down, and Pete caught the scent of fresh blood. Then, as Cold Deck unrolled it on the path beside him, the sudden cold fingers of

apprehension seemed to have Pete by the throat.

This was a hide—that of a big cow—and Pete knew what that shot had meant. Cold Deck had killed the first cow he could find and skinned it. It was big, green, heavy. Cold Deck's eyes glittered as he untied the lariat, then, with a slash of his knife, severed the thongs which tied Pete's wrists and ankles.

"Reckon you're too stiff to cause any trouble for a spell, and you don't need that extra," he commented.

THAT was true enough. It was torture to straighten his arms again, to start to work the circulation back into limbs which had lost the power of feeling. Cold Deck watched him for a while in silence, until the flow of returning blood, the sharp prickle of awakening flesh, caused Pete to set his teeth sharply. Then, at that juncture, Cold Deck picked him up, still helpless to resist, and dropped him onto the big cowhide.

"Nothin' like bundlin' yuh up warm," he chortled, and started to roll the hide up, with Pete on the inside, like a moth in a cocoon.

Pete knew now that his worst fears were realized. This was an old Indian trick, to inflict horrible torture and a more horrible death. The raw, fleshy part of the skin was outward, the heavy hair next to his body. But when Cold Deck stopped a minute later, it was all rolled up around him closely, so tightly that Pete could do little more than wriggle his fingers or wrists. Half numb as he had been to begin with, he could not move, could not possibly crawl out of it.

And already the several heavy folds of skin and hair were uncomfortably warm. As the hours wore on and the sun came up, beating down on the path, the hide would begin to dry, under that enervating heat, to shrink and contract. Prisoned already, he would be constricted still more as time went on.

The Indians had a way of leaving an enemy thus and never returning. In addition to being tormented by thirst, the victim would be gradually squeezed to death, as the hide continued to shrink and draw tighter on every side, through the long, endless days....

Cold Deck picked up the lariat rope, took a turn around the hide, and tied it up to the tree against which Pete had been sitting.

"Yuh might get notions that yuh'd prefer to roll down-hill and into the drink, figgerin' that drownin' 'd be more pleasant," he nodded. "But that'd be too easy. I'll take time to look up the way yuh sign yore name, legal—and when I come back, yuh'll be mighty glad of a chance to get out of that and sign!"

Without another word, he turned, and Pete heard him mounting, heard the receding sound of his horse's hoofs, riding back down the steep mountain trail. He was alone.

Alone, in the worst predicament he had ever been in. Pete had no doubts as to that. Bob Dexter had happened along here on that one day, but it was a chance in a thousand that he or any other man would come this way again for weeks. And Cold Deck would take precautions to see that no one did. He would post the Box 8 crew to keep them from coming past here, would likewise post some of them to guard the border and prevent outsiders from trespassing. The chance of help from any outside source was almost zero.

Some of the numbness of arms and legs was gone now, but that numbness would gradually return, slowly, insidiously, to claim his whole body. Pete struggled desperately, frantical-

(Continued on Page 86)

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An Off-Trail Western Yarn

By Bliss Lomax

(author of "Horse Thief Creek," "Saddle Hawks," etc.)

Fate offered Ed Russell a golden opportunity to get rid of Dick Womack—the man who was breaking up his home—but Ed turned it down. He knew a still better way!

IN THE darkened house, shades lowered against the heat of the long hot desert afternoon, Myra Russell hurried to the window, tall and slim, as a madly driven pony pulled up to front of the stage-office, across the street.

It was Brent Hayes.

"Ed Russell just pulled a man out of the Malo!" she heard him say, as men ran forward, questioning. "He's bringin' him in now!"

She dressed hurriedly. Her husband, big, rawboned, was at the door by the time she had finished.

"Myra, will you fix a bed for this man?" he asked. "He's all in."

"Why, yes, Ed. What happened?"

"I went out to look at some horses. I was comin' back by way of Malarena Crossing when I heard a cry —and there he was, in the quicksand up to his shoulders. His horse was gone clean out of sight. He'd missed the ford by only a few feet, but you know the Malo."

The doctor arrived a few minutes later, and they watched as he examined the man.

"We'll feed him some whisky," he said. "He's just suffering from shock . . . Wonder who he is?"

They shook their heads. The young man, in his middle or late twenties, was a stranger to them all. Even in repose he was rather handsome, his clothes of finer quality than usually seen in San Leandro.

"You think he'll be all right, Doc?" Russell asked.

"Yes, in a day or two. He'll have to be kept quiet."

Myra glanced questioningly at her husband. "Ed—are we going to keep him here?"

"Well—" he answered thoughtfully, "We've got room enough." The low, rambling adobe, built more on the lines of a ranch-house than a dwelling in town, was large beyond their needs. "I don't know where else to take him. You don't mind, do you, Myra?"

"No," she said simply. "We'll put him in the room at the end of the hall."

SHE found herself beguiled by the distraction Ed had brought home in the person of Dick Womack.

"Is your husband away?" he asked, as he sat in the rocker on the porch, the day following his rescue.

Myra inclined her head. "He'll be back tonight," she said easily. "He's gone pretty much of the time. He runs the stage lines."

By adroit questions he drew out the story of the past five years, since her marriage to Ed Russell.

"San Leandro is pretty dead, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Yes . . . There's nothing much doing."

"Don't you ever long to get away?" he queried meaningfully.

"Sometimes...." she murmured, her lids lowered.

He withdrew from the brief contact with her to glance over the town. There were no telegraph wires, no railroad. He would meet with no questions—except Myra's. But he would need a job.

Russell unexpectedly supplied one; Ed found himself liking the man. There was something glamorous about Womack that suggested a life of ease, good living, the excitement of strange cities. It appealed to Ed, principally because he himself had always been a plodder, the rim of the desert country his farthest horizon.

"If you can keep books," he remarked the next morning at breakfact, "I can use you. What do you say?"

"I say fine!" Womack replied deliberately.

Myra poured him a second cup of coffee, and only then did she meet his gaze—one level glance.

WOMACK continued to live with the Russells. When Ed was away, he examined Myra's plain, soft face and realized a growing hunger for her, some promise of intensity in her very plainness whipping him on.

She no longer smiled so readily; Womack thought he knew what was worrying her.

Often, after supper, they sat on the porch, conversing desultorily. When darkness fell he made it a point to stroll up the street and while away the evening in the Band Box saloon, to make sure he didn't overplay his hand.

It was usually after midnight when he returned to the darkened house. Myra was always in her room. He wondered whether her door was locked, the thought keeping him awake for hours.

The evening that she set chairs out behind the house, on the plea of greater coolness there, he felt that he had won a victory. They talked about everything except what was on their minds. Slowly the sunset faded out. Beyond the palo verde tree the sky was mauve. Then it shadowed, and dusk settled.

Pensively Myra rose to go in. He preceded her with the chairs; and in the darkened house he put his arms around her tenaciously.

SAN LEANDRO saw less than usual of Ed Russell in the days that followed. The Government had accepted his bid on several new mail contracts. It meant building a station at Cochinilla Wash, and purchasing additional equipment.

His mind was not on business as he drove into town one hot afternoon two weeks later, in a flat-bed wagon, the springs bowed under a heavy load. Pulling up at the barn, he glanced across the street apprehensively. Abbie Bassey and Mrs. Pope, the wife of the postmaster, were just passing the house. He was relieved to see them go on.

Old Dobe, his stable boss, lank and desert bleached, emerged from the office to take the team.

"Just let 'em stand for a minute, Dobe," Ed told him, starting across the street.

As he reached the porch, Myra stepped out, cool and immaculate in the starched blue linen she affected. She appeared momentarily self-conscious.

"Well, you're back."

"Yeah. Just got in. You goin' down the street?"

"I've a little shopping to do," she said hurriedly.

"If you'd been a minute sooner, you could have walked down with Abbie and Mrs. Pope. They just went by. I thought they was goin' to stop in."

Myra's head went up. "I'm just as well satisfied they didn't," she said. Her tone was sharper than she intended.

Ed caught it. "What's the matter? Abbie been gittin' in your hair? I thought you was good friends."

Myra did not succeed in wholly dissembling her annoyance. "I guess if the truth were told, that old snoop hasn't a friend in town....Will you be home tonight?"

"Yes. I'll be in two or three days this time. You run along, now, if you've got somethin' to do."

She nodded. "I'll have supper about six."

Abbie Bassey and Mrs. Pope observed her as she passed the post-office.

"Humph! Her!" Mrs. Pope sneered. "Somebody ought to speak to Ed Russell before it's too late."

Abbie pursed her mouth acidly. "According to what I hear, it's too late already. Not that there's a man in San Leandro who'd think of speaking!"

THEY reckoned without Jim Bickel, the town marshal. Russell and he were cronies. In the doorway of the stage-barn they chatted with their customary informality. Womack was in the office, bent over his books. Bickel nodded toward him.

"Reckon you made a ten-strike when you picked him up, Ed," the marshal commented. He had a walrus mustache, but the rest of him was shark-skin, brown and leathery. "I notice the women flockin' in here regular....Your San Leandro business must be pickin' up a heap."

"Why—why, no! I ain't noticed any difference." Russell hesitated, frowning. "....You don't mean there's anythin' out-of-the-way goin' on, Jim? I won't have that."

"Shucks, no!" Bickel declared guilelessly. "I guess Womack is all right. You wouldn't have him stayin' at your house if he wasn't....What's that you got under the tarp?"

"Why, Jim, I got a piano for Myra," Russell confessed. "She's been wantin' one for three years. It's to be a surprise.. Will you give me a hand, Jim? I want to get the piano in the house before she gets back."

With the help of Dobe and Jose, one of Russell's hostlers, they soon had it installed. Bickel shook his head to himself as he walked up the street. "It's a damn shame!" he muttered.

Ed found the office empty when he got back, Womack having stepped over to the post-office. He sank into his swivel chair, a smile wreathing his face. As he waited for Myra to return, Dobe came to the door to ask about some horses.

"If you get time tomorrow, you better clean this place out," Ed suggested. "Get rid of this old harness and stuff. With women comin' in here we got to spruce up a little."

Dobe looked at him blankly. "Wimmen? What wimmen? I ain't seen any around here—unless yo're speakin' of Miz Bassey. She's been comin' in here every Monday for three years for her package of Peruna.... She ain't fussy," he grumbled as he turned away.

Leaning back in his chair, Russell was puzzled. "Why'd Jim give me a yarn like that?" he asked himself. He was about to give it up when something in Bickel's remembered words made him pause. A bleak look came into his eyes.

"Was he tryin' to tell me the man's makin' a play for Myra?"

But why hadn't Myra spoken to him, if anything was wrong? Surely she would not allow such a situation to hem her in. She was too level-headed for that.

"I reckon there ain't nothin' to this at all," he pursued, more coolly. "I'd 've heard somethin' about it before now. Why, it would make so much talk in this town that Myra—"

He stopped, dumbfounded, as he remembered her annoyed reaction to his mention of Abbie Bassey, San Leandro's worst gossip.

"Good Lord—" he groaned.

He threw down his cigar violently, to stare glassy-eyed at the floor. Under the impact of his mounting rage against Womack, his huge frame trembled.

"I'll square this in a hurry!" he promised himself.

HE SELDOM carried a gun any more, but there was a .44 in his desk. He produced a key and unlocked the drawer.

"No!" he muttered. "I can't do it! It would shame Myra!....I've got to keep her out of this."

At the end of five minutes he had fought himself into a cold, emotionless calm. Taking up his hat, he left the office.

In the Band Box saloon, he found several friends, who joined him in a drink. He lit a fresh cigar, talking with them, trying to beat back the sense of disaster which had engulfed him.

For the first time in his life he

was conscious of an air of diffidence hovering between himself and these men whom he had known so long.

With a smile that was no little effort in itself, he walked out. Home was the last place in the world he wanted to be just then, but Myra would be waiting supper.

Nearing the house, he heard the deep, full tones of a piano. He had forgotten about it. Unimportant as it was now, he was conscious of a fresh stab of pain as he recalled how he had looked forward to Myra's surprise and elation.

"Womack changed all that," he thought, a fresh wave of bitterness sweeping him.

His courage failing him momentarily, he paused before setting foot on the porch. As he stood there, mastering his emotion, Myra struck a chord or two and then lifted her voice in a song that was a favorite with him.

"When other lips and other hearts,
Their tales of love shall tell—"

In the old familiar lyric he found a poignant significance such as the author could hardly have intended. "What could have made her sing that song now?" he asked breathlessly. It was only an absurd coincidence, but he read something prophetic in it. The next moment, Womack's soft tenor reached him; Myra and he were singing together.

Something died in Russell, understanding flooding him. In his torment he had seen Myra fighting off Womack, despising him. Not for a moment had he imagined it was like this.

"So that's the way it is."

Noiselessly he lowered himself into a porch chair. He sat there for a long time. The door opened without his being aware of it.

"Ed!" Myra exclaimed. "How long have you been here?"

"Just a minute," he lied, pulling himself together. "I was sittin' here listenin' to you play....Was you surprised when you found the piano?"

"Was I!" There were spots of color in her cheeks. "It's wonderful!"

She didn't throw her arms about him and bury her head on his shoulders as she usually did when he brought home even a trifling gift. He was glad she did not; he knew he couldn't have stood it.

HE WAS pretending to examine the piano when a man banged on the door. It was the driver of the Magdalena stage. There had been a cloudburst about Cochinilla; he doubted that he could get through.

"You'll have to go around by La Canada," Ed told him, grateful for the interruption. "I'll go back to the barn with you."

The departure of the Magdalena stage wound up things for the night. Ed sat in the office, slouched down in his chair. Dobe poked his head in at the door, prior to climbing the stairs to his quarters above. Long-winded as a rule, he limited himself tonight to a brief, "I reckon I'll be turnin' in."

"He knows," Ed thought, listening to him clump up the stairs. "I guess they all know."

An hour and more passed as he sat there. Across the way Myra had stopped playing. For a moment he caught her shadow against the window as she turned out the light. Suddenly he found himself gazing into the future, going through the years without her—barren, blank.

"No!" he whispered, his face contorted with anguish. "I couldn't make it without her!"

It got him nowhere to call himself a fool for having brought Womack home and then to have turned around and left him alone with her for days. He admitted all that, but it belonged to the past now, along with whatever had happened. His problem concerned tomorrow.

The folly of emptying a gun at Womack struck him forcibly. "I certainly can't do that," he warned himself. "If Myra thinks she's in love with him it would be the surest way of losing her."

Although he took it for granted, now, that Womack was stealing from

him—the man was losing too much money at stud games—he had not bothered to look at the books, for sending even a guilty man to prison seldom affected a woman's love. And men lived to come out of prison. He did not propose to resort to anything so unpromising and indefinite. But rolling the matter over again in his mind, he was electrified to discover what appeared to be a means to the end—conclusive, final!

The express book was handy. He discovered a number of discrepancies, some of them dating back to within a few days of the morning Womack had first taken charge of the books.

Still poring over them, he realized someone was standing in the doorway. He glanced up to find Womack facing him. "I didn't hear you come in," he said. His tone carried no indication of his feeling.

"You were busy, I guess," the other observed. "I saw the light and wondered who was in here." His glance went to the open express book. "I haven't entered today's business," he volunteered. "I usually do that the first thing in the morning."

"That's all right," Ed assured him, "I was wonderin' how long it's been since we had anythin' for the San Juan Minin' Company. Been almost three weeks. Their business used to be worth two hundred a month to us."

"Tom Hughes tells me they're closing down," Womack explained, somewhat relieved. "You staying up much later?"

"No, I'll be goin' over to the house."

Womack waited for him to lock up.

"Have any luck tonight?" Ed queried casually.

"No, they cleaned me." The words were accompanied by a mirthless chuckle.

They had almost reached the porch, when from off across town came a flat, muffled crack.

"Sounded like a gunshot," Womack said uneasily. Ed nodded. They listened for a second shot, but all was still.

BECAUSE he never knew what hour of the night he might be called, Russell had his own room.

With no thought of sleep he stretched out and gave himself over completely to the details of the step he proposed taking. No trace of pity for Womack softened his resolve. He had saved the man's life; now, with grim justice, he would take it; trick him out of it in a way that must forever make it appear to Myra to have been an error of judgment on the dead man's part—an error that would always remain coupled in her mind with not only her own disillusionment, but the everlasting proof of how cheaply he had held her.

Weary as he had never been before, Ed closed his eyes and slept. It was almost dawn.

A few minutes after seven Myra awakened him. She closed the door behind her as she entered. He knew at a glance something was wrong.

"Ed, will you get dressed right away?" she demanded breathlessly. "Jim Bickel is here."

"Bickel? What's he want?"

"He's come for Dick," Myra gasped, her hands fluttering nervously. "Cal Springer was killed last night. He claims Dick did it—"

"What?" Ed asked incredulously. "Cal Springer's been killed, you say?"

"Somebody shot him," Myra explained, scooping up his clothes and handing them to him. "They found his body out in the mesquite a hundred yards from his cabin a few minutes ago. He'd been robbed—"

Russell shook his head sadly. "That's too bad. I always liked Cal. He was a gambler, but a mighty good friend to me. He loaned me money when no one else—"

"Ed, won't you hurry?" she entreated. "Bickel is waiting."

"Why, sure!" he mumbled, drawing on his pants. "I'll be ready in—" He stopped, recalling why Bickel was there, and stared speechlessly at Myra for a moment.

"What's Womack got to do with this?" he demanded. Unconsciously his tone was so gruff that Myra recoiled.

"Nothing," she said, steadying herself. "Dick lost to Springer last night and had to give him an I O U for part of it. They had an argument. Dick admits he said he'd get Springer for it."

"Oh, I see," Russell muttered as he bent to pull on his boots. He had himself in hand again.

"No, you don't, Ed!" she exclaimed sharply. "Bickel found that I O U in the brush this morning—torn to bits. He won't listen to reason."

"What reason, for instance?" Russell queried.

"Dick says he was with you when the shot was fired—that both of you heard it . . . That's a fact, isn't it, Ed?"

HE DREW in his breath heavily. Without his lifting a finger, fate had delivered Womack into his hands. All he had to do was deny the other's story. It would put a noose around Womack's neck.

"Suppose you let me talk to Bickel," he suggested cautiously.

There was a strained, desperate air about her; and something courageous too. Russell had the feeling that she was steeling herself to tell him the truth, to say frankly that she loved Womack. It filled him with horror. He knew if it were ever put into words it would be just that much harder to forget. And it must be forgotten.

"Then you didn't hear the shot?" she asked. Her voice was toneless.

"Why, sure I did!" he exclaimed, trying to dissemble his agitation. "We was steppin' over from the office. We both spoke about it." He was glad to get it out, to put himself on record. What a fool he had been to consider even momentarily any plan but his own! "It's only the time I'm hazy about," he said thoughtfully, or so he pretended. He knew the hour well enough. "Did Bickel say when the shootin' happened?"

"A few minutes past one," Myra informed him. A trace of color was stealing back into her cheeks. Ed noted it with relief.

"Well," he declared confidently, "that puts Womack out of it. Open the door and we'll get this over with in a hurry."

Myra hesitated as she put her hand on the knob. Ed sensed that she was deciding whether to let the moment pass with so much unsaid. Hurriedly then, as though escaping from something which she found too much for her, she stepped into the hall.

Womack and Bickel were waiting in the living-room.

"Ed, let me introduce our popular and well-known marshal, Mr. Bickel." Womack said it with a laugh, but the laugh was a sneer in itself. "He's got it all figured out that it was me who shot Cal Springer." The next instant every vestige of his indifference had fled. His body stiffened and his face went hard. "Ed, put this gent right!" he snapped. "You *know* I couldn't have fired that shot!"

Bickel sat back, a bored look on his face.

"He figures I'll make certain Womack won't get out of this mess," Ed told himself. "You mind steppin' out on the porch a minute, Jim?" he asked.

The door closed on them.

"ED," BICKEL said bluntly, "we got this rat where we want him."

"Suppose you tell me what you know, Jim," Ed suggested.

Bickel had little to add to the story as Myra had told it. "The evidence is only circumstantial, but that'll be enough in his case," he concluded.

Ed shook his head. "Jim, you're barkin' up the wrong tree. Womack's right when he says he was with me when that shot was fired."

"What!" Bickel glared at him incredulously. "See here, Ed—do you mean you'll testify to that effect?"

"I'll have to, as I see it. He was with me."

The marshal shook his head pityingly. "Nobody saw you with him, did they?"

"No, they didn't; I reckon my word will be enough, though—"

"It'll be more than enough!" Bickel burst out furiously, as unbelief gave

way to exasperation. "If that's the way you want it, Ed, all right."

"I wouldn't want it any way but the way it was," Russell declared without hesitation, determined that Bickel should win no admission from him that he had any reason for wishing Womack out of the way. "I don't like the idea of his gettin' into an argument over a card game or askin' for chips he can't pay for. But after all, he's only workin' for me, Jim."

CAL SPRINGER'S unexplained death filled the town with excitement that barely touched Russell. His mind was locked in a vise, and Womack and Myra were always in his train of thought.

He felt he was only marking time; his plans were complete; to set them in motion he needed only to bait the trap.

Womack was writing up some outgoing express as Ed entered the office in the middle of the afternoon. As they talked about the shooting, Russell glanced across the street. The new piano was silent.

"Bickel still blowing off about me?" Womack inquired.

"No; he told you he was mistaken. I guess that ended the matter in his mind." Watching the other, he wrote several letters. He felt Womack was watching him too.

"Maybe he's afraid I'll start goin' over the books," Ed told himself. "You been to the bank yet?"

"I'll be going in a few minutes," Womack replied. "By the way, Pete Denzler had a look at the horses we're getting rid of. He said he'd be back."

Womack was just leaving when Pete stepped through the door. He ran the San Leandro livery and did some freighting into the Datils.

"Hi Ed!" he said, waving a pudgy hand. A fat, apoplectic little man, he draped himself over a chair and puffed into his white mustache. Womack was back from the bank before he got down to business.

"I've decided to take those horses, Ed. I'll give you forty-five dollars a head for 'em—spot cash!" he declared, producing a roll of bills.

The horses were worth more than he was being offered, but gazing at the fat roll of yellowbacks in Denzler's hands, Ed knew he had found the bait he wanted for Womack. It was a few minutes after three; the money would have to be left in the office safe over night.

Denzler had not finished counting out the money when Myra appeared in the door.

"Have they—found out anything yet?" she asked.

"No; it's just as much a mystery as ever who shot Cal," said Ed.

He asked Myra if she were going down the street.

"I'm going over to Mrs. Ott's to have a dress fitted," she answered him.

She and Pete started out together. The latter turned in the doorway. "I suppose you'll be here for the funeral tomorrow, Ed. The lodge will conduct the usual services."

"Say, I'm glad you remembered to mention it!" Russell exclaimed, welcoming the query for reasons of his own. "I was figurin' on goin' up to Cochinilla in the mornin'. I'll change my plans and go this afternoon."

ALONE with Womack, he handed him the money. "I hate to keep that much in the safe. Just be sure you lock things up if you step out."

He had Jose saddle his horse. A few minutes later he rode up to the office door and called Womack out. "If the San Juan is closin' down we'd better get a settlement out of them. I know there's some money due us. We'll go over their account in the mornin'. If I forget it, remind me."

Womack's head went up an inch or two. "Right," he muttered.

"That got to him," Ed told himself as he jogged away. "He knows the jig is up the minute I start checkin' the San Juan account. With a chance to get his hands on upwards of a thousand dollars, he'll grab it and run."

He realized there were several ways a man might go in fleeing that

country. Only one, however, would put him beyond danger of pursuit by daylight. That was the old Malo trail. Ten miles east of the river, it turned to head for the border. Womack had missed that turning once; he would figure not to miss it a second time.

And he would not get into trouble at Malarena Crossing again. On several occasions he had ridden out to the ford, only a mile or two from town. It was plainly marked by the sagging stakes that had stood there for years.

It was all as simple as that in Russell's mind.

Ahead of him the Cochinilla road, carved deep into the face of the mesquite-covered plain by the wheels of his own stages, uncoiled its long white miles.

As afternoon merged into evening, he pulled up to survey the rolling plain. It was a silent sea on which nothing moved. Swinging the big bay out of the road he struck off in a wide circle to the southwest. In that direction lay the Malo.

An hour later, in the fading afterglow, he came in sight of the crossing. It was a barren approach, the sluggish river, sullen and dark, wandering aimlessly through the gray vastness of the desert.

He scanned the trail for minutes. He was alone.

Unhurried, he dropped his rope over the stake that marked the lower edge of the crossing. It came out with a hollow, sucking sound as he backed his horse away. A few minutes later he had it driven into the mire again. But now it stood to the north instead of the south of the other stake.

He cautiously tried the false crossing, making certain that the quicksand ran in close. Satisfied that it did, he backed off to view his handiwork. Even to his eyes, and he had been using the ford for ten years, there was nothing to suggest that Malarena Crossing was now a death trap.

In a shallow arroyo, below the crossing, he hobbled the bay. Leaving the horse there he returned to within a few yards of the trail, where he crawled into a clump of mesquite. He had nothing to do now but wait.

IT WAS time for Womack to be coming along. For a few minutes after the Lordsburg stage pulled out he would have the barn and office to himself; time enough for him to loot the safe and saddle a horse.

But the minutes fled without bringing him. Russell's uneasiness grew. Maybe the Lordsburg stage had been late.

"Nothin' to worry about yet," he argued. But he did worry, and when another half-hour had passed and Womack had not appeared, he found cold sweat standing out on his forehead.

He had been so sure of what Womack would do. Now he couldn't be sure of anything but that the other had taken the money and flown. Perhaps even now he was well on his way to Lordsburg, or heading for Arizona by way of Blue Mesa. Perhaps he was not alone.

It was a crucifying thought, but there was iron in Russell, and he put it away from him.

Every minute that passed made the next longer, less endurable; he glanced at his watch. It was a quarter-past-nine. He decided to wait another fifteen minutes. If Womack did not come by then he'd put the stake back and get to town as quickly as he could.

The fifteen minutes were almost up when a faint drumming of hoofs reached him. He raised up on his elbow and listened intently. The sound was unmistakable now. Screwing his eyes in the piercing squint, he swept the desert; but the vagrant night wind had set the mesquite to nodding, and at a distance, in the pale, eery glow of the stars, it took on strange, fantastic forms that resolved into a solitary horseman one moment, and became a ghostly caravan the next, and he could not be sure whether he saw the rider or not.

Confident again, Russell did not question but what it was Womack, moving along at a comfortable pace that would bring him to the cross-

ing in two or three minutes.

As he waited, a voice drifted to Ed. He recognized it. His face tightened.

"Womack...." he muttered. "I called the turn."

Breathless, he waited, the passing seconds a lifetime.

And then he saw Womack..riding down the trail alone, humming a song as he moved along leisurely.

He passed within a few feet of Russell. At the water's edge he hesitated only long enough to be sure he was between the stakes.

Eyes stony, Ed turned away, but he found it possible to pity the man. A moment later Womack's terror-stricken cry, the sound of water being threshed to spray, the frightened bawl of a horse, filled the night.

RUSSELL trudged back to the arroyo and got the bay.

The night was still again. The dark and treacherous Malo purpled along with a sinister gurgle, its surface unbroken save for Womack's drifting hat.

He watched an eddy catch it and carry it toward the opposite bank. He knew it would be found and brought to town. And thus would Womack's tragic end be established.

His hands steady, though he was white of face, Ed replaced the stake. There was nothing to keep him there any longer. "I might as well be movin'," he said to himself. "It's a long ride to Cochinilla."

THE END

★ PRENTISS OF THE BOX 8 ★

(Continued from Page 77)

ly to crawl, but he was wrapped far too tightly in the heavy, encumbering hide. The effort left him bathed in sweat, weak, conscious again of the sound of the waterfall, but not having moved at all.

He knew the truth of what Cold Deck had said. He would cheerfully have rolled down the steep slope below, into the lake, in preference to this, if given a choice. But that rope held him fast, up here.

ONCE HE lay still, the night wasn't so bad. He grew more stiff and cramped with every passing hour, but the day, when the sun beat down, would be worse. Once or twice small animals passed nearby; one stopped to gnaw at the bloody hide a little, then, catching his scent, scampered away. Pete was rolled well inside of the big hide, out of sight.

He dozed a little, which helped. Dawn came, then the sun. The effect was slow but increasingly persistent. It grew warmer inside the heavy hide, hot, hotter. Sweat ran from every pore. It was stifling inside the skin, and the stench of raw flesh and blood made it worse. A few insects began to find their way inside, an added torment.

He almost lost count of time. All that he could see was a patch of blue sky, far out, and the limb of a tree. Not much of either. And to his ears kept coming the tormenting sound of the waterfall. His tongue was thick now, his mouth dry. He had almost ceased to sweat, though this was like a Turkish bath. But the moisture was being boiled out of him.

Once, at what he judged was a little past noon, he heard a sound which filled him with wild hope—somebody whistling. He had the idea that it might be Bob Dexter, hunting as usual, and not too far away. Pete tried desperately to shout. But his voice was little more than a croak in his throat; the cowhide muffled the sound. Nothing happened except that the whistling faded and was gone.

And now a new torture was added. The skin, drying under the fierce, dry heat of the sun, was starting that

process of contraction, becoming unpleasantly tight. He could barely wiggle his fingers now.

The long day was nearly done, he knew. And so was he. Cold Deck had not returned. The conviction grew in him that Cold Deck had no intention of returning. With Pete gone, he'd get the ranch anyway. And this was the sort of final, slow, bitterly inexorable vengeance which would most appeal to Cold Deck.

CHAPTER XXVI

Water!

THE PERSISTENT murmur of the waterfall was a continual torture now. Pete could picture the lake, cold and deep, the flashing spray of the falls, the river below, with its eddies and pools, the springs here and there along the banks, adding their bit to the whole. Water! Water so close at hand, and yet so unreachably far away.

Night was coming on again; the sun had set, and it was a little cooler. His mind was dull, hardly able to comprehend. It had been the longest day he had ever spent, the longest he ever would know. He couldn't stand another such day.

The sound of Cold Deck's voice came as a surprise, for he hadn't heard him approach. Perhaps he had dozed a little, on the verge of unconsciousness.

"How yuh comin' in there?" Cold Deck asked. "Enjoyin' it?"

Fierce anger flared anew in Pete against the man who had done this thing to him. He strove to curse him, but his tongue was thick and the words were garbled. Cold Deck chuckled, and the mouth of a bottle was thrust in against Pete's mouth. Water! Part of it ran out and bathed his face in blessed coolness, and he swallowed a little of it. Not much, for the bottle was withdrawn again.

"Mebby yuh can talk better now," Cold Deck suggested. "That taste good?"

It was nectar and ambrosia, whatever those might be, but nonetheless bitter anger still consumed him. Fired by it, he had no intention of giving in.

"There's plenty more where it came from," Cold Deck went on. "And I can still get this hide off yuh if yuh're ready to be sensible. I've got an agreement ready for yuh to sign—and plenty water. Ready?"

"You can go to the devil," Pete said thickly. "Likely he'll take you in as a full pardner in his business."

"Meanin' yuh won't sign?"

"Meanin' I won't sign."

"Well, I gave you your chance. So far as your signing or not is concerned, I don't much care anyway—and I won't be coming back again!"

Cold Deck stood up from where he had been hunkered down and started to move away. Unreasoning panic surged through Pete, but he resisted the impulse to call after the foreman, to agree to whatever he stipulated. He wasn't going to give in. And he knew, from what had happened already, that to sign would be the signal for death, more speedy than this, but just as certain.

Pete clamped his lips. He heard the receding sound of hoofbeats down the trail again, followed by silence. An unearthly scream split the night, but it was merely a screech-owl, probably on a limb of the tree above him. Somewhere a coyote howled in a strange medley of tongues, then, closer at hand, some small animal started to sniff around the hide, and he could hear sharp little teeth gnawing at it. A flurry of growls arose as a second animal appeared on the scene and was challenged by the first comer.

None of this mattered much to him. There were too many layers of the heavy cowhide around him, and it was too tightly shrunken into place, for these squabblers to make any particular difference or to give him a chance. And there was still the echoing roar of the waterfall—

He became aware that, aside from the waterfall, the night had grown abruptly still again, like a calm before storm. The animals which had been fighting over the scraps of meat on the hide had vanished like shadows, and other small noises of the night had been stilled as before

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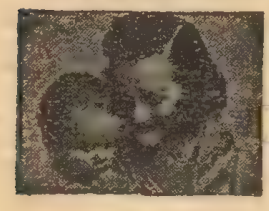

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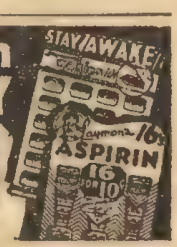

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something greater, something which commanded their respect and fear. And then he heard it—a paw rasping on the rocky trail, a hoarse sniff, and Pete felt a new sensation—for Old Slewfoot had come.

It wasn't fear which gripped Pete now, for nothing could be any worse than the fix he was in. Even death itself would be a welcome release. But the presence of the big grizzly still had the power to do something to him, as it did to every living thing which crossed his path. Slewfoot was the king of the wild, and he carried his kingship with a ruthless paw. Now he had reached the hide, and stopped to investigate. His sniffing woof was loud and truculent.

FOR A moment he looked it over, knowing it for a cow hide, but perhaps perplexed at finding it in this place, where cattle never climbed, and in such a position. Probably the scent of man came to his keen nostrils, but that held no terrors for Slewfoot. Rather it caused a growl to rumble in his throat, dislike to spring to full-fledged hatred.

What happened then was so sudden as to be shocking. Angered and perhaps disgusted by this meatless thing which he found in his path, Slewfoot ripped at it with a mighty paw. Pete could feel the impact of it through the several stiff layers of hide, hear the rasp of the claws along the partly dried skin. Evidently that swiping stroke caught the lariat rope which was wound once around the whole and passed from there up to the tree, and the rope snapped like a piece of string.

The next instant, still as a result of that powerful paw, the hide was rolling and tumbling down the steep incline below the path.

It struck against a stunted pine, bounded crazily, and kept on going. Then, an instant later, with a splash which must have startled even Old Slewfoot up above, it reached the water and went under, entirely out of sight.

The skin had struck the water sidewise, which kept it from going down so deep as would have been the case

(Continued On Page 89)

if it had made the dive endwise. Even so, it went under for quite a distance. But the heavy, rigid skin took all the violent impact of the water, so that Pete scarcely felt it.

What he did feel was the sudden sense of coolness, the water pouring in at both ends. It came to him that he'd probably drown now, but that was a joyous change from the prospect of only a few minutes before.

Then, buoyant as a cork, the hide shot back to the surface and plowed forward for thirty feet or so before it slowed to an easy drift. The waters of the impounded lake were very deep, and at this end, opposite the dam, they scarcely moved at all. Likewise, they were very cold, Pete discovered—almost icy cold.

For long hours he had been too warm, sometimes sweatingly hot. Now that was suddenly reversed, and the transition, pleasant for a few moments, became uncomfortably the other way. Then he discovered that luck, to some extent at least, was still with him. The skin floated so that he was lying on his back, submerged up to his chin, but his nose and mouth were safely out of the water. If it had turned the other side up, he would already have drowned.

He had swallowed enough water to quench his raging thirst and, weak as he was from sweating, from being so constricted, as well as from lack of food, new life seemed to flow back into his veins with the quenching of his thirst. But he was still a helpless prisoner.

Still, there might be a chance at escape now, where none had existed before. Two-thirds of the heavy hide was submerged, and all of it had been well under water. It was still green enough to soak up quickly again, and as it soaked it would expand. Here in the lake, with nothing to hold it together, the edges would begin to unroll a little, to loosen. Maybe he could wriggle out of it after a while.

The actual chances of doing that were pretty slim, and what would happen to him after that, if he actually did get out, Pete refused to think about. It would have to be one thing at a time now. He set to work, twist-

(Continued On Page 90)

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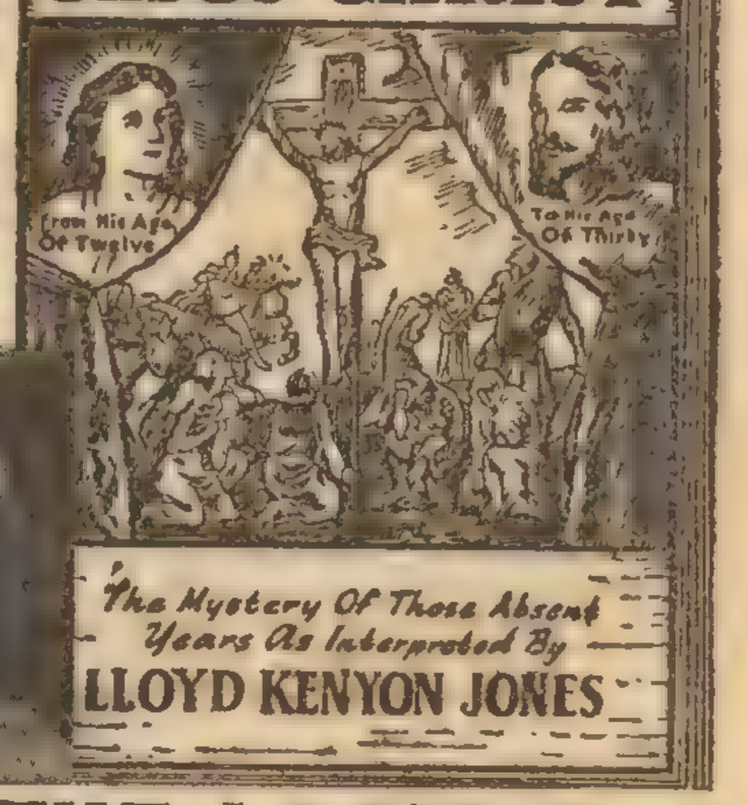

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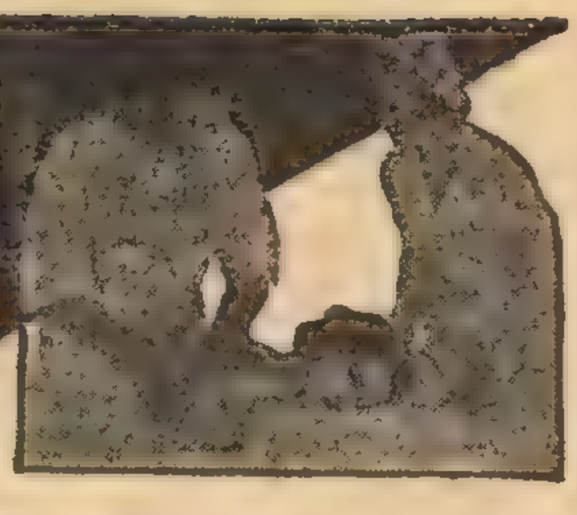

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(Continued From Page 89)

and and squirming, able to move a little now. And then he discovered that, if he was to get out at all, it would only be after the grimmest fight of his life.

The big hide, having lain flat on the ground as it dried, had formed into a shape which kept it balanced so that his face was upright, and that, in view of the mirror-like stillness of the lake, kept it from turning over as he worked and leaving him face down in the water. But he was so terribly cramped from those long hours in the skin that it required a definite effort of will to force any muscular activity back into his hands or legs. Even his fingers had ceased to have any particular feeling.

PETE persisted. The cold water had shocked the blood to coursing again in veins where the circulation had been checked, and that helped somewhat. But as he did manage to roll his whole body a little, to move both arms somewhat and even twist his legs a little, he repeated the experience he had suffered before, after being tied back at the cavern—only this was far worse. Ten thousand needles seemed to be prickling his skin, stabbing through it in a vicious torture.

There was one good reaction which he had no time to think about. The exertion to which he was forcing himself served in part to counteract the numbing cold of the water. One arm moved a little more, he felt the whole hide around his shoulders sag a little more loosely and, gritting his teeth at the pain, he worked the arm back and completely out of the covering hide.

Free, the arm felt as though it had been broken, but it was all right, and he could tear at the loose edge of the now soaked skin with it, and thus gain more room inside. He worked his other arm loose as well, then, with a sort of frantic patience, set about inching back out of his cocoon.

Here was more trouble, for now, as his head and shoulders worked back, they dipped completely under water with every effort. He managed to sit

half up, but the whole thing turned and collapsed under him. Then, surprisingly, it had slid away from him, and he was free, out in the water.

Free, apparently, to drown. For by now the chill was penetrating to the very marrow of his bones and, the first flush of energy gone again, he was close to exhaustion. He could do very little swimming under such conditions. And though the shore wasn't very far away, it was a sheer ledge of rock, a dozen feet above the level of the water. He couldn't climb out even if he did reach it. The water, right up to the cliff, was at least a hundred and fifty feet deep.

And the big hide, still partly rolled together, which might have served to buoy him up as a raft, had shot away, and was drifting now far out of reach.

CHAPTER XVII

Cake Eater

"SHUCKS, this ain't no time to get discouraged!" The thought ran through Pete's mind as he forced stiff and numbed arms to thrash about and keep him afloat. "Here I've been wantin' a drink for hours, wantin' to get loose, and I've got both of them. And I always figgered that, for a cowboy, I was a pretty good swimmer. Let's see you make that brag good, cowboy!"

His mind, dull during the afternoon and evening, was active enough now. But that wasn't enough, when his body was too tired and cold to keep going. Encouraged himself as he might, he knew that it was only a question of minutes now. The shore was a hundred feet away, and while he had set for his next goal the job of reaching it, he didn't believe he ever could. Even if he did, he couldn't get out when he got there. Two hundred feet farther down the bank shelved enough so that it might be possible to climb out. But that would mean three hundred feet of swimming—

A faint splash came to his ears, but it didn't much interest him. Probably a beaver, swimming in these

(Continued On Page 92)

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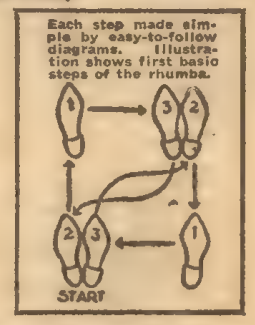

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(Continued From Page 91)

precincts supposedly sacred to himself and his kind, had discovered some alien presence and hit the water with his tail to warn of danger. He couldn't swim any farther, try as he might—

"Pete! Pete! Do you hear me?"

Pete blinked, trying to open closing eyes, to struggle a little farther. But it was no use. He was pretty far gone, he realized, when he heard an angel's voice. And that was what it had been, naturally, for it had sounded like Hazel's voice—

"Pete! Here, don't fight now. Let me help you."

It was Hazel, beside him, getting one of his arms over her shoulder, without any conscious volition on his part, then swimming strongly down the lake, toward that part of the shore where there might be a chance to get out. Something seemed to snap in Pete's mind, releasing it, while fresh energy, a second wind, coursed through him. Somehow Hazel had happened to be on the shore, had seen him and had come to his rescue. That splash had been her dive into the lake.

But she was encumbered by her dress, just as he was by water-soaked clothes, and he had to help her. Pete managed to swim a little, and he saw her face, white and strained, then what must have been the branch of a willow was pushed into his fingers, and he was told to hold fast.

"I'll help you out," Hazel encouraged him, and he saw her scramble out. Then she was reaching down, helping him, and he was out, on the steep slope above. He tried to stand, but his legs buckled under him, and he crawled on hands and knees for a while, until the ground became more level and he could stand up with her assistance.

Then, back under a cluster of trees, he collapsed, thankful just to lie there, not cramped in any way, to rest. He was still cold, but the desperate exertions of the past few minutes had kept his blood flowing, and, soaked though he was, he appreciated the warm night, much warmer out here than in the spring-fed waters of the lake.

It had been, he saw, a desperate battle for Hazel to rescue him, but she was excited and smiling now.

"How on earth did you ever get out there, Pete?" she demanded. "Tell me what has happened."

IT WAS a relief to talk. He told her, enough so that she could understand, but dwelling lightly on the torture of those hours while the sun beat down and the skin gradually dried. He saw the play of emotions across her face—concern, pity, anger, and something else in her eyes as she looked at him.

"Oh, Pete!" she whispered. "That was horrible!"

"Seems to have had a happy ending," Pete grinned. "How on earth did you happen to be here, to find me?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. I'll bet you're starved, you poor boy."

Pete rubbed his chin.

"Well, that wouldn't be exaggeratin' much," he agreed. "Let's see, just when did I eat last?"

"I'll be back in a minute," Hazel promised, and disappeared. She was as good as her word, for she returned presently with a coat, from whose pocket she produced a package and opened it. Food! Sandwiches, even a piece of cake.

"Eat it," she urged. "It isn't much, but it should help."

Pete needed no urging. He was into the second sandwich when he stopped suddenly.

"How'd you happen to have this?" he asked. "I'll bet it's your lunch."

"Go right on eating, for I had supper," she adjured. "I did slip it into my pocket, thinking I might be out all night. But you eat every crumb of that."

"I'm a very obedient sort of a hombre," Pete grinned. "You were going to tell me how you happened to be around just when needed."

"There are a lot of people out hunting for you, Pete. I—"

"Yeah," he nodded. "I remember now. The posse. I'd completely forgotten about them."

"Not the posse," she denied. "There isn't a posse any longer. You see,

(Continued On Page 94)

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(Continued From Page 93)

Zane recovered consciousness, along early this morning, and told his story. He didn't see who it was that shot him, but he cleared you. And since you had disappeared—well, some of your friends have been trying to find you. I wandered up this way, just on chance, since I didn't know where to look. I saw something out in the lake; then I saw that it was you, and you were almost sinking. That's all, I guess."

"That's a whale of a lot," Pete declared, finishing the last of the cake. "Did you make that cake?" he demanded.

"Why, yes, I did. What's that got to do with it?"

"That was the best cake I ever ate in my life, and I wanted to tell you so. You make that sort regular?"

Hazel colored a little.

"Why, pretty regular, I guess. It's nothing extra."

"It is to me. And Zane is getting along all right, is he?"

"Doc Tutt thought he'd pull through now. He stayed awake long enough to clear you, then went back to sleep."

"Heard anything about Slim Mowery?"

"Why, no, I haven't. I rode back from town, straight to our ranch, and reported to Dad and Bob. Then we started out."

Pete nodded. He was warming up a little again, and he felt relaxed, cheerful, in a mood to turn over, right there on the carpet of pine needles, and sleep the clock around a couple of times. But something caught his ear, and he was suddenly on his feet, drawing Hazel back with him out of the opening, where moonlight filtered down.

Even as he started to move, a rifle bullet whistled past, venomously close. Two hundred feet away, Cold Deck was coming on a run.

CHAPTER XVIII

Death At Heel

WHAT had happened was swiftly clear to Pete. Cold Deck had been bluffing

(Continued On Page 96)

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(Continued From Page 94)

again when he had said that he wasn't coming back. He had figured on going away, leaving Pete to a wave of fresh hopelessness and despair for an hour or so, then on returning once more, and this time finding Pete in a mood to sign. Cold Deck wanted that signature, giving him legal possession of the Box 8.

He had returned, to find Pete and the hide both gone. Probably that had startled and surprised him for a little while. Then he had seen or heard something, off across the narrow lake, and had started circling to investigate.

It had been his intention to slip up on them unobserved, but Pete's trained ear had heard him, and his swift move to get out of the patch of light had warned Cold Deck. Now, probably having heard that Zane Zackett was alive, knowing that the game was up unless he played a ruthless hand Cold Deck was prepared to do just that.

The first thing was to kill Pete. Once he was out of the way, Cold Deck would be boss of the Box 8 by right of possession, with his gun-ready crew behind him. Such witnesses as there might be to what he already had done would be hunted down ruthlessly. Master of the country by right of might, he aimed to hold it.

And if he could get rid of Pete, he'd be pretty apt to succeed. Pete was his big stumbling-block, because he was the legal owner of the Box 8, the dominating ranch in Poison Valley.

A second shot quested for them, but it was wilder, aimed at random. Cold Deck was getting a bit panicky, for he couldn't quite conceive of a man who could escape from the position he had left him in. But, panicky or no, Cold Deck was all ruthless k''ler now.

Hazel's face was white in the gloom. She and Pete were unarmed; their only chance lay in flight. They turned, ran a few steps, keeping to the darker places, and the anxious light in the girl's eyes turned to dismay. Pete was in no shape for a race of life and death with a man

like Cold Deck. He was still too stiff and cramped for his legs to respond very well. He simply couldn't do it.

"Go off that way," she whispered imperiously, pointing. "Go quietly, Pete. I'll go this way. It's our only chance."

She was gone, running in an opposite direction, making quite a bit of noise but not too much. As she said, it was their only chance. To stay together meant that they would both be killed. For while Cold Deck might have scruples where a woman was concerned, he had reached the point where he wouldn't let scruples interfere with business. If Hazel was a witness to murder, then she would have to be disposed of.

IT WAS that realization, as much as anything else, which induced Pete to run the other way. Hazel was still in danger, desperate danger, but it was he whom Cold Deck wanted, and there was less danger for her away from him than with him.

He saw Cold Deck plunge past, following Hazel, going by ear. That ruse wouldn't work for long, and Pete made the best of the chance which Hazel had given him, going as silently as possible, circling down toward the head of the lake.

His ears were straining for the sound of a shot, and his attention wasn't too much on where he was going. The next instant his feet slipped out from under him and he was falling.

Pete stepped short with a jar, some ten feet down. Blinking, he looked around, and saw that, in the half-darkness, it wasn't so much wonder that he had fallen, after all. Grass and short brush grew up above, and this was a crack in the earth—or it was more like a crack than anything else, though it was in reality a small canyon. Ten feet deep here, it wasn't more than four feet wide, either at top or bottom, and the top of it was almost covered over by grass and brush. It seemed to run off in both directions for an indefinite distance.

He couldn't very easily climb back

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 97)

out of it here, but for the moment he wasn't anxious. The voice of Cold Deck came faintly to his ears again —cursing in a helpless fury. Which informed Pete that the foreman had discovered how he had been fooled, and had left off chasing Hazel to swing back and try to find Pete again. Now, in the grip of his anger, Cold Deck had thrown caution to the winds and was blundering along, growling to himself and making a lot of noise.

Pete could hear him approaching; then he veered off again on a new tack. It was apparent to him that Pete must be somewhere in this vicinity, and he was trying desperately to find him. He came back again part way, moving more carefully now, but Pete could still hear him. Then, at a loss, Cold Deck swung once more, and the faint noise was gradually lost.

Crouching down in the crack-like canyon, Pete grinned. That tumble had been a piece of sheer luck. Otherwise Cold Deck would almost certainly have found him. As it was, the foreman was completely puzzled now, uncertain as to where he could have got to. And it had given Hazel a chance to get away. She would probably go for help.

Pete was feeling a lot better now. The stiffness had finally left his limbs, the cold was gone from his body, and while he was still tired, the lunch had helped a lot, as had the water. He was still in shape to do a good deal, if he had to.

He tensed at a new sound. It couldn't be mistaken, and he knew, without any question, that he'd need to do all that he could in a supreme effort. Somewhere down the canyon, Old Slewfoot was coming up—and Slewfoot was on his trail!

Most bears shy away from trouble or contact with a human as eagerly as the average human shies away from them, with fear and respect. But Slewfoot was not of that ilk. He had become a killer, and in turn he had been ruthlessly hunted. Because of that, he entertained a burning, aggressive and ever-present hatred for man, any man, all men. Moreover,

he was hungry tonight. The hunting hadn't been good, and he had been considerably angered when that strange meaty object which he had found on the trail and started to investigate had got away from him and plunged into the lake.

SINCE then he had been on the prowl, here around the head of the lake, and now, scenting man ahead again, he was wanting both vengeance and meat. Slewfoot was in his most dangerous mood.

So far he hadn't caught sight of Pete, partly because of turns in the canyon, partly because he was nearsighted at best. But he was coming up it. Pete turned and ran, following it, hoping for a way out, for some chance at escape. He was under no delusions as to the mood that Slewfoot would be in, nor as to how ruthless a killer he would be tonight. There wasn't much choice, in their present moods, between Cold Deck and Slewfoot.

Pete grinned briefly at the irony of it. All unwittingly, Slewfoot had saved his life once tonight. Now, if he could manage it, he intended to kill him.

But if he could get out of here and find a good tree to climb, he'd stand a chance. Grizzlies were notoriously poor climbers, and Slewfoot was too big to be any good at it. The first thing was to escape from the canyon.

That wasn't proving to be so easy. It had grown deeper, widening out a little as it ran, but there was no place which seemed to offer a way out. The sides were still sheer up and down. Somewhere behind Pete could still hear the bear coming on. Not having actually sighted him, the big grizzly hadn't broken into a charge, that shambling run which, though it looks so awkward, can cover the ground faster than a horse can run. If he could keep out of sight—

Pete was breathing hard from his exertions, but now, ahead, the canyon seemed to end—there was a way out. He gasped in relief and kept on going. Here was a way out, all right,

(Continued On Page 100)

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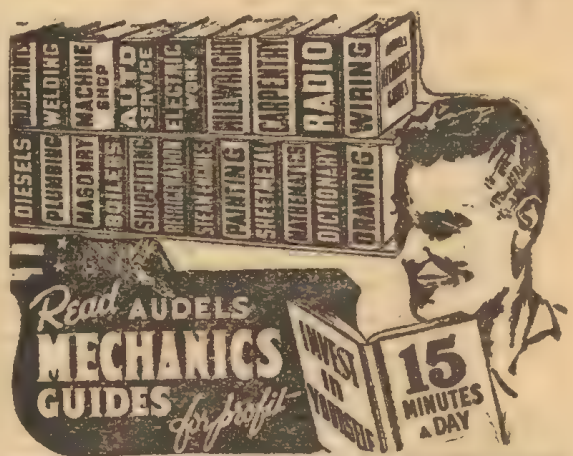

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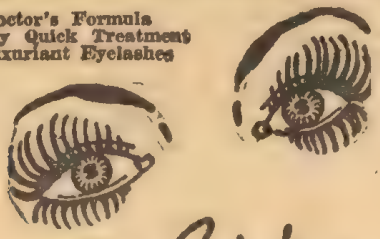

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(Continued From Page 99)

but to one side was the lake, and Pete didn't care to jump into it again, even to escape Slewfoot. All along here the sides of the lake were high and steep, and once in it again, he'd drown, even if Slewfoot, watching as long as he struggled, wouldn't be on hand and waiting if there was a chance of climbing out again. For here at the head, Slewfoot would quickly circle, splashing across the river, which was little more than a creek now, if Pete tried to reach the far shore.

On the other side was rough, canyon-like country—a place where Slewfoot could travel far easier and faster than he could. And no trees which amounted to anything grew here. The only way open was up the side of the mountain—a rough, rocky, precipitous trail. Pete climbed hard, and as his muscles seemed about to fail him, he saw the grizzly scrambling along behind him, not a hundred feet back. The sight added a new burst of energy which Pete hadn't suspected he possessed.

Here, climbing this way, they were fairly evenly matched, and Pete was at least holding his own. But in a chase of this sort, if it continued long, he would be no match for the grizzly. Pete topped the crest and turned off along a path at the side, the only path or chance to keep going. From the sounds, Slewfoot was still persistently climbing.

Pete's eyes brightened. Up ahead a hundred feet or so the path widened out somewhat, and there were a couple of good-sized pine trees. If he could keep going long enough to reach them and climb, he might be safe.

It was his only chance, but the going wouldn't be easy, climbing the first ten feet or so—and those ten feet were vital. To be pulled down by a questing paw, with safety just another branch out of reach, wouldn't be a nice end to this race. Lungs burning with the effort, legs fairly shaking under him, Pete staggered ahead. Just a few more steps—

He stopped, but not of his own volition. Sheer, stark horror flooded across him, such terror as he hadn't

experienced even in the depths of the drying cowhide. For something had seemed to leap at him from the grass of the trail—to leap and grab with a numbing grip. He had stepped squarely into a bear trap set here along the trail.

CHAPTER XXIX

Doom Catches Up

THE closing jaws of the bear trap had caught high up on his leg, not far below the knee. The snap of the tempered steel springs was vicious. For a trap such as this had been built in the first place to catch and hold such monsters as Old Slewfoot, and that necessitated fine steel and sturdy construction.

Pete's boot and trouser leg offered a little protection, but not much, against the crushing impact. Enough to keep that first snap from breaking the bone, but for all that, sharp pain raced up his leg, and from the first Pete knew how helpless he was. He was caught—with Slewfoot close behind!

Pete remembered now the remark which Cold Deck had made the other day, following the killing of the steer by the big grizzly: that he intended to have a try at trapping him. Slewfoot was trap-wise, but it was evident that Cold Deck knew something of the nature and habits of the big renegade from long observation. He had had this mountain trail in mind at the time as a likely place to conceal traps where Slewfoot would be pretty apt to go, sooner or later.

"And that was a good guess—only Slewfoot won't need to worry about the traps when he does come," Pete reflected wryly.

He glanced back down the trail, expecting to see the big grizzly come charging into sight. Instead, there came a terrified blat from a calf, followed by an answering roar of rage from the grizzly, a fresh crashing off to the side in the brush.

It wasn't often that cattle followed these high, steep trails, back in here around the head of the lake, but now

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

and then they did venture this far up in the hills. And hearing the noise now, Pete could reconstruct accurately in his mind another tragedy of the wild—one more tragedy in which both killers of the range, Cold Deck and Slewfoot, figured.

Somewhere around the foot of the trail, back in here, a cow had ventured and had left her calf hidden in the brush while she took a brief holiday. Probably the same cow that Cold Deck had killed for its hide, the evening before, careless as to whether a calf was left orphaned or not.

The calf, of course, would lie silent and unmoving where it had been left, for hours. But following the long night and the still longer day during which its mother did not return, with mounting hunger and thirst it would grow restless and unsure. Now the proximity of the grizzly, the pungent scent of the killer in its nostrils, had terrified the calf, frightening it from its covert. And as it jumped and ran, with a shrill blast of terror, Old Slewfoot, angry and hungry, was diverted from following the trail into pursuit.

Pete could guess that much from the sounds, and he felt a thrill of hope. If Slewfoot could be kept away, he might have a chance. But a look down at his foot wasn't encouraging. Without clamps to compress those mighty springs, he couldn't possibly free himself from the trap. Even the stroke of Slewfoot's paw, a paw which could break the back of a horse, against those springs, or his mighty jaws tearing at them, would have little effect.

Setting his teeth against the mounting pain in his leg, Pete studied the situation. As he had expected, the trap wasn't fastened solidly. The short, powerful chain was attached to an old log, partly concealed in the grass. This log was some six feet long and nearly a foot thick, calculated to prove a heavy drag if the bear was once caught. A bear like Slewfoot could pull it along behind him, but slowly, leaving a plain trail to follow. Yet it would give a little whenever he tried to get

a solid pull, preventing his mighty strength from tearing his foot loose from the trap, as might happen if it was solidly anchored.

The chain was wired to the log, and Pete set about loosening it. It would still be next to impossible for him to walk with the heavy trap on his leg, but he would have a little freedom of action.

HE HAD it almost freed when a sound caused him to turn.

It wasn't Slewfoot standing there in the trail, as he had more than half expected. It was the other renegade of Poison Valley, Cold Deck.

There was a half-smile on the killer's face now, a smile as mirthless as a mask. In the crook of his arm he held a rifle.

"So you decided to wait for me, did you, Prentiss?" he asked.

Pete stared back at him. The only difference, he saw, between Cold Deck and Slewfoot was that the bear would have charged to the kill at once. Cold Deck preferred to savor his triumph first.

Receiving no reply, Cold Deck's smile broadened.

"When I set that trap for a varmint, I didn't expect to be so lucky in what I caught," he nodded. "But that's one of the beauties of trappin' —yuh never know what prize you'll get. And this time, Prentiss, I've not only got yuh hard and fast, but there won't be any more fooling. This time I'm going to shoot yuh, just like I would any other animal that stepped in that trap."

Pete waited, still in silence. His refusal to answer, or to plead for mercy, seemed to infuriate Cold Deck.

"Made up yore mind that I wouldn't let yuh go, eh?" he sneered. "Well, that's plumb correct. I've given yuh plenty chances already, and you didn't take any of them when the takin' was good. Right now it wouldn't be any mercy to let you loose, anyway. Yuh're in no shape to ride out of this country—and it ain't big enough to hold the two of us."

(Continued On Page 104)

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(Continued From Page 103)

"It won't be big enough to hold you much longer," Pete retorted.

"No? Think yuh've stirred up enough of a hornet's nest to chase me out? Yuh don't know me very well. I've been preparin' for this for a long time—and I'm not going to fail now. How does it feel to have yore foot in a trap?"

"A coyote like you wouldn't enjoy it."

Cold Deck's face reddened angrily. He half raised the rifle—the moonlight shone cold and hard along the barrel—then lowered it again.

"Looks to me like yuh're anxious to get it over with," he said shrewdly. "And so there's no reason for being in a hurry. Once I do shoot yuh, I'll just carry yuh across to the lake, which is right handy, and plenty deep. With that trap on yore foot, yuh'll sink to the bottom, and stay there. Folks'll figger yuh've left the country, and if they do any other surmisin', they won't be able to prove a thing."

That, Pete realized, was a fair summoning up of the situation. If there was only something that he could do, some way to fight back! But he was weaponless, unable even to move around. And from the sudden glint in Cold Deck's eyes, he knew that the killer had made up his mind, and was through with fooling.

Again the rifle barrel lifted. It was starting to center, expertly, when, coming from the same direction that Cold Deck had, Old Slewfoot burst into view and came ahead in the clumsy, galloping run which was so devastating. He was not a hundred feet away when he came in sight, and his sudden appearance seemed almost to paralyze Cold Deck. Plainly he had not suspected that the big grizzly was anywhere hereabouts tonight.

The rifle wavered, started to swing toward the bear. But for once, something close to terror had Cold Deck in its grip. He took an unsteady step backward, and a high scream of pain and fear broke from his lips. He pitched wildly, threshing about like a madman, the rifle

falling from his hands while the grizzly came on.

Cold Deck had stepped into another of his own hidden traps!

CHAPTER XXX

The Silver Lining

OLD SLEWFOOT was in a particularly vicious mood. He had been hungry tonight with a gnawing appetite which had been with him for days. Following his killing of the steer the other day, he had been driven off from that spot without a chance to satisfy his appetite, and with three fresh bullet wounds to aggravate him.

None of them was serious, but all of them tormented him persistently—enough not only to keep him in a constant rage, but to spoil his hunting. Try as he would, he couldn't stalk prey as expertly as usual, and on two separate ocasions a particularly vicious twinge of pain had caused him to snarl involuntarily at just the wrong moment, and so to warn intended prey that had escaped his charge.

Tonight he had found that cowhide, and had lost it just as he was about to investigate its possibilities. On the trail of man, he had been diverted by that blatting calf, which he had turned aside to pursue in the conviction that it would be an easy prey.

But again he had been fooled. The calf had run in blind, headlong terror, keeping ahead of him just long enough to reach the lake shore and to plunge far out and land in a mighty splash down below. There it would drown, but Slewfoot was experienced enough to know that it was out of his reach.

Doubly angered, he had circled around on a new trail, and had quested gradually back toward where he had been chasing Pete, this time coming up the trail from the opposite direction. Now, scenting not one but two mortal enemies ahead of him, Slewfoot lowered his head and charged, utterly heedless of any danger to himself.

(Continued On Page 106)

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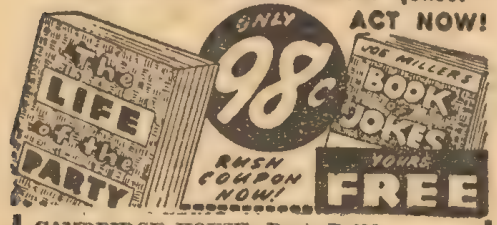

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(Continued From Page 105)

It was his sudden appearance, and the beginning of that charge, which so unnerved Cold Deck. His step back had been involuntary, for seeing the grizzly had made him forget that he had planted another trap in the trail. The jerking grab of the jaws about his ankle served completely to unnerve him.

Pete had watched in startled comprehension. Cold Deck's involuntary motion in falling and throwing his arms wildly sent the rifle tumbling far beyond any chance of his recovering it, but almost to Pete's feet. Without an instant's hesitation, Pete snatched it up and began pumping bullets at the charging grizzly.

Even with the rifle, Pete wasn't at all sure that it would do any good. He knew that he was sending the bullets where he wanted them to go, but despite their terrific impact, Slewfoot kept rolling along. . .

Then, when it seemed that mere bullets were as bee stings before the impact of the charge, Slewfoot wavered, staggered, and began a headlong, plunging slide. He was hard hit, finished. He collapsed in a heap almost beside where Cold Deck lay.

Had Cold Deck remained quiet, all would have been well. But he tried to jump and crawl away, and the trap chain jerked him back, sent him sprawling against the grizzly. The glazed eyes of the bear opened for a moment, red with hate. A mighty paw lifted in a last slap, a blow which could still break the neck of a bull. Then man and bear, renegades of the Silvers, lay together in one pile, curiously alike in death.

PETE stood for a moment, staring, finding himself suddenly weak and shaking with the reaction. The rifle, he discovered, was empty. He had pumped eight bullets into the grizzly to stop that devastating charge. A few extra bullets would have been welcome now, for with them he might have shot the bolts off the heavy bear trap, loosening the springs and relaxing the grip of the jaws.

Probably Cold Deck would have

(Continued On Page 108)

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(Continued From Page 106)

more cartridges on him, Pete remembered. First, however, he tried inserting the rifle barrel between the partly opned jaws of the trap, prying with it. But while it helped to relax the terrific pressure on his leg a little, it wasn't enough.

A fresh idea came to him, and he found a stone of the right size, then pried and wedged it between the jaws at their widest point of opening, back from his leg. Again he pried, inserting another wedge of stone, until on one side the spring was almost entirely compressed. But the other spring still held him captive.

Twisting loose some of the wire which fastened the trap chain to the log, he wired the one spring down solidly, then turned his attention to the other side. It wasn't so hard now to pry the jaw open on the far side of his leg, still using the rifle barrel as a lever, and to pull his foot out.

His leg was numb, and fresh waves of pain jarred through him as he tried to walk. But, using the rifle now for a crutch, he managed it, hobbling slowly back down the trail

Hazel and Bob Dexter found him a quarter of an hour later. At sight of him, Hazel ran forward with a little choking cry, and had him in her arms as he staggered and all but collapsed.

"Pete!" she said. "What have they been doing to you?"

"You look like you'd been through the mill," Bob added.

"Get the horses, Bob," Hazel commanded. "Hurry!"

Bob turned, running, and Pete sank down on the ground. He managed a twisted grin in response to the grave inquiry in the girl's eyes.

"I stepped into a bear trap," he explained. "Nothing to worry about—now. No bones broken, I guess. I'll have me a sore leg for a spell, but if I was to have a good nurse while I was laid up, it'd be worth all the trouble, I guess, and then some."

Hazel colored, then, meeting his eyes, nodded.

"You'll have as good a nurse as I can make, Pete," she promised. "Or would you like somebody else?"

(Continued On Page 110)

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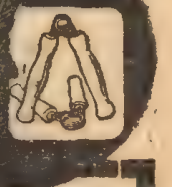

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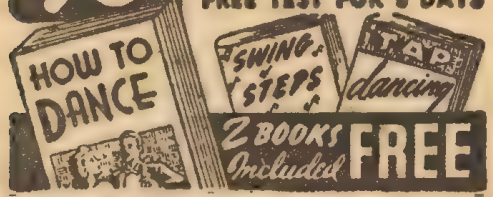

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(Continued From Page 108)

"Reckon I'd step into another bear trap—to have you look after me permanent," he said, and this time, she saw, there was no raillery in his voice, though his eyes still smiled a little.

"You won't need to—not if you feel that way about it," she agreed, equally grave; and for the next few minutes Pete almost forgot the pain of his injured leg.

Bob found them there when he brought the horses a few minutes later.

"What happened anyway, Pete?" he demanded. "I thought I heard some shootin'. Must have been more than just steppin' into a trap, from the sound."

"Why yes, I was stopping Old Slewfoot," Pete conceded. "He was charging us."

"Us? Who do you mean?"

"Cold Deck was there, too."

SUDDEN apprehension was back on Hazel's face now.

"Cold Deck? He—"

"Slewfoot got him," Pete explained gently. "We won't have to worry about either of them any more."

Bob eyed the two of them uncertainly.

"I'm sure glad to hear that," he said. "But what the dickens have you two been talkin' about all this time, not to get all that said? Sure'd be the first thing I'd ask about, if it was me."

"We were just discussing the idea of you having me for a brother-in-law," Pete explained. "Think you could get used to the idea, Bob?"

Bob stared from one to the other, then his face relaxed in a broad grin.

"Gosh," he breathed. "So you two're thinkin' of gettin' married, eh? Well, it's sure all right with me. A man who can kill that big puma, then kill Old Slewfoot, and top that off by gettin' the worst renegade the valley ever had—it's sure all right with me. This won't be Poison Valley any longer. It'll be the valley of the Silver again, with—er—with a silver linin'. Here I'm getting poetical, too. Think you can ride, Pete?"

(Continued On Page 112)

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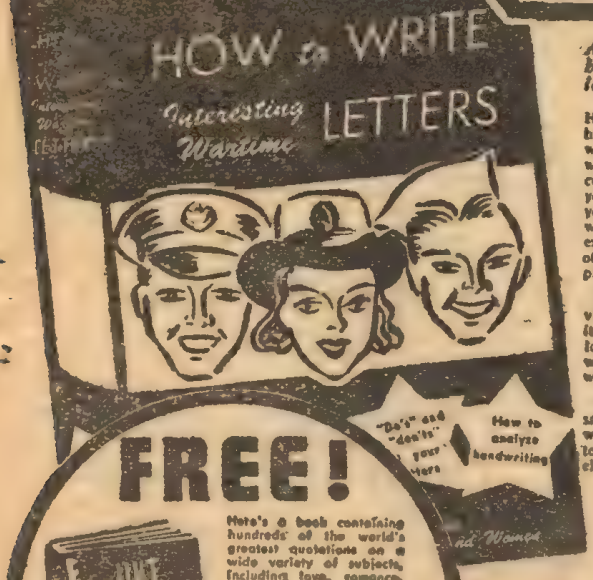

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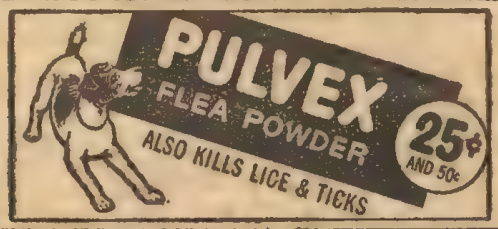

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(Continued From Page 110)

"Sure I can ride," Pete agreed. "Just give me a horse."

"We can go to our place," Bob suggested tentatively. "You'll be among friends there."

"Guess we better go to the Box 8," Pete decided. 'Soong Lin wouldn't like it if I didn't, and I owe quite a lot to him. There'll be no more trouble from the rest of the crew now, with Cold Deck out of the way."

"Reckon not. But what about the rest of the valley? Dad was sayin' you had some big scheme in mind, and he sure thought it sounded fine."

"Who told him?"

"It was Slim Mowery, I guess. Slim's coming along all right now—so is Zane Zackett. And they've sure spread the word around this country that you're all right. Though I could have told them that myself, after I got to know you."

"Just what is this new idea of yours, Pete?" Hazel asked. "Dad said it was a dandy, but we didn't have time to talk."

Pete colored a little.

"Why, shucks," he protested. "It ain't so much. Just sort of being neighborly. Since I was tied up from rentin' or sellin' water or a right of way or anything like that, it just occurred to me that partners didn't need to rent or buy from each other. I talked it over with Zane, and he agreed it was legal. Form a big corporation, with all the ranchers in it that want to come, each one havin' a share in proportion to the size of what he puts in. Everybody run their own place same as usual, but the company all works together where that will be the best thing. No leasing or selling involved at all—just everybody being neighborly for the good of all concerned."

Hazel's eyes glowed.

"I think that's just splendid," she agreed.

Bob started to speak, then changed his mind.

"Reckon I'll ride on ahead and tell Soong you're comin'," he said, and suited the action to the word. "Shucks," he added to himself, "they didn't even hear what I said."

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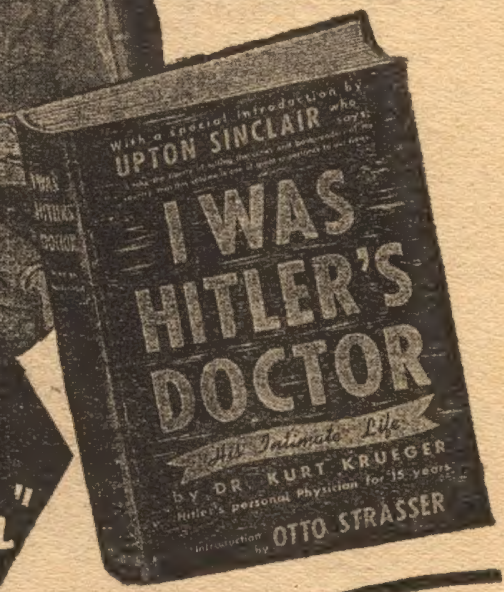

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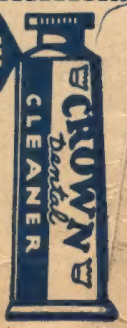

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